HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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21 January 2019
Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Security Agreements: European Union

1. Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on future security agreements with the EU.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I have regular conversations with Cabinet colleagues on a range of matters. The deal that the House considered last week confirmed the commitment of the UK and the EU to a new security partnership and included a transition period. In considering a way forward, we must focus on ideas that deliver the same benefits, are genuinely negotiable and have sufficient support in the House.

Debbie Abrahams: Title V of the draft withdrawal agreement describes the ongoing police and judicial co-operation between the UK and the EU on criminal matters. Given that it has taken 30 months to agree the 13-page section on security and that the section covers only the transition period, why should we have any confidence in this Government completing negotiations to ensure this country's future safety and security by the end of next year?

Sajid Javid: Security is an absolute priority for the Home Office, which is why it should come as no surprise to the House that all capabilities on which the UK would wish to co-operate with the EU are covered in the political declaration. If the hon. Lady wishes to continue that kind of co-operation, the best thing to do is to support the deal.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What estimate has my right hon. Friend made of the intervention by Sir Richard Dearlove and General Guthrie?

Sajid Javid: I read the intervention carefully a week ago. Although I have huge respect for those two individuals and listen to them on many issues, I think that they are completely wrong in their assessment.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The last time the Home Secretary appeared before the Home Affairs Committee, he told us that, in the event of no deal,

"we will be as safe—if we are talking about the SIS II system, for example, as we were just now", and said that Schengen Information System II is merely a “nice to have”—those were the words he used. Since then, the Met Commissioner has said that losing access to SIS II

"will be more costly undoubtedly, slower undoubtedly, and potentially, yes, put the public at risk.”

The National Crime Agency has also said that there is “a risk that this country will be less safe as a result.”

What is the Home Secretary’s assessment of the risk to the country, particularly in policing and security terms, from no deal, and why is his assessment different from that of the police?
Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady will know that paragraph 87 of the political declaration talks about how the UK and our EU partners will work together to consider continuing arrangements for missing and wanted persons, and on other issues, such as criminal information exchange. Today we are lucky to live in a very safe country. Under our assessment, I am confident that, whether we have a deal or no deal, we will continue to be a very safe country.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): The arrival of 39 suspected migrants via crossings in just the last two days is a considerable concern to my constituents in Dover and Deal. When will the Home Secretary next meet his French counterpart to discuss this matter? Will the Home Office carry out round-the-clock aerial surveillance urgently? Can he confirm the date on which the two cutters in the Mediterranean will return to be on station to secure our border?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. We have started to deploy aerial surveillance of the English channel since I declared a major incident. While we await the arrival of the two cutters in early February, we have increased the presence of vessels, including with help from the Royal Navy. I will be meeting my French counterpart, Minister Castaner, this week.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Further to the question asked by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the police have said that direct access to EU databases such as SIS II are mission critical for their work in tackling criminals and terrorists. What guarantee can the Home Secretary give the House today that, after the transition period, Britain and the police will still have access to these mission-critical databases?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that those databases are important, which is why it is very good that we have an agreement in the political declaration to consider how we can keep using such arrangements. Again, if he is that concerned, he should support the deal.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is it not the case that our closest security and intelligence partnership is with the United States and the “Five Eyes” signatories, none of which are members of the European Union; that our closest defence partnership is with NATO, not the EU; and that, whether we leave the EU with or without a deal, we will be signing a security and intelligence arrangement with the EU?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of the security relationship we have with many other countries, including, of course, with our “Five Eyes” partners—that is a critical relationship—and the NATO alliance. That does not take away from the fact that we also want to continue co-operating with the EU, and I am sure that we will.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary help me, please? The European Court of Justice has oversight of the European arrest warrant, SIS II, Europol and Eurojust. He says that we will have arrangements with all three; how does he cross the Prime Minister’s red line on those issues?

Sajid Javid: That is quite straightforward. If the right hon. Gentleman takes the time to read the political declaration, he will see that it refers to establishing arrangements—for example, for the quick and efficient surrender of individuals. They are not necessarily exactly the same instruments, but we have done this in a way that is consistent with our taking back control of our laws.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I have listened with great care to the Home Secretary. He will be aware that the EU insists on treaty arrangements governing key aspects of international security, justice and policing. Without a treaty, courts have no legal basis to implement arrest or extradition warrants, and cannot allow access to criminal and other databases to third countries. The danger is that there will be a mutual loss of the European arrest warrant and the UK will no longer be able to access the Europol database in real time. How does he justify putting the security of the nation at risk in this way?

Sajid Javid: The Government have suggested to the EU—if the deal gets through Parliament, this is what will be looked at—having an internal security treaty between the UK and the EU because, as the right hon. Lady quite rightly says, it is best to have these arrangements on a proper legal footing and it makes sense to do that through treaty-type arrangements. I have to say, however, that if she is really concerned about continued co-operation, she should support the deal.

County Lines Drugs Operations

2. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to prevent young people from becoming involved in county lines drugs operations.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): We have provided £3.6 million for a new national county lines co-ordination centre to enhance the intelligence picture and to support efforts to identify and safeguard victims. The centre launched in September last year and carried out its first week of action in October, leading to more 500 arrests and more than 300 people safeguarded.

Kerry McCarthy: I was pleased to see it reported recently that the Government are treating the victims of county lines as victims of modern slavery. That is a helpful approach, but I have two concerns. One is that children who have been excluded from school are particularly at risk. My second concern relates to housing. What conversations are Ministers having with their counterparts in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to make sure that children who are at risk are not housed back in the area where the people who have persecuted them live?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her continued focus on modern slavery. She is absolutely right that this is not just about policing, although of course that is a
vital part of our treatment of serious violence and county lines. It is about taking a holistic approach, which is why the Home Secretary chairs the serious violence taskforce, which brings together local government, national Government and all the relevant agencies. That can make a real difference in the lives of young people who may be vulnerable to the gangsters.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In November, West Midlands police was granted a cash boost of £1.8 million to help to deal with gangs and violence. Does the Minister endorse the work of the charity Redthread to prevent youngsters from joining gangs and becoming drug dealers?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to endorse the work of Redthread, a charity we support not just in the midlands, but in London and Nottingham. I have been delighted to visit accident and emergency departments where Redthread is in operation. Its workers reach out to young people when they are in A&E departments, at what they call the teachable moment. That is exactly the sort of positive voluntary work we need.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Will the Minister update us on the Government’s public health approach to tackle serious violence? I am not asking for an update on the serious violence strategy, the Offensive Weapons Bill or the youth endowment fund. I have been following those very closely, but I cannot find anything about the Government’s public health approach, as announced at the Conservative party conference. Perhaps the Minister can update us now.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her assiduous focus on this important topic. I am grateful to her for her work on the Youth Violence Commission. We are due to consult on the public health duty, a legal duty that will apply across the board to help to embed a public health approach in our treatment of serious violence.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of unsolved crime.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will know that we are very conscious of the impact that mental health issues can have, not only on the immediate victims of serious violence but, of course, in respect of the ramifications further afield for communities affected by serious violence. A great deal of work is going on to help people with mental issues who are being dragged into county lines, in particular. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing met the relevant Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care only last week to discuss this issue.

Unsolved Crime

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of unsolved crime.

Mr Hurd: I am sure that, given the seriousness of the point the hon. Lady raises, she will welcome the fact that rates of prosecutions and convictions for rape and sexual offences are at low as 4%—among the lowest in the country. The chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council has said that this is because of fewer officers and staff. The Government’s decision to raise money through an increase in council tax means that West Yorkshire will be able to raise almost the same as Surrey, despite having double the population. Will that really meet local need?

Mr Hurd: In the year to June 2018, the proportion of recorded crime that was closed with no suspect identified was 47%—a similar proportion to that in the previous year.

Mr Hurd: Charge rates in West Yorkshire have fallen for some key crimes, with charges for sexual offences as low as 4%—among the lowest in the country. The chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council has said that this is because of fewer officers and staff. The Government’s decision to raise money through an increase in council tax means that West Yorkshire will be able to raise almost the same as Surrey, despite having double the population. Will that really meet local need?

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): For the victims of county lines and youth violence, the trauma from their experiences will be devastating, yet far too often police forces and mental health trusts do not work together to make sure that their needs are automatically assessed, leaving children extremely vulnerable and at risk of being re-exploited. Will the Minister commit to working with her colleagues with responsibility for mental health to ensure that all such victims receive an automatic referral to mental health services? Will she commit to coming back to the House at the earliest opportunity with a full update on progress against the wider serious violence strategy?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady will know that we are...
encouraging vulnerable victims of so-called hidden crime to come forward. I hope that the hon. Gentleman would welcome that and that, given his concern about seeing Hampshire police properly funded, he will vote for the proposed police funding settlement, which would see police funding for his local force double.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister will know that in Telford and Wrekin there is currently a call for not only an independent inquiry but a council-led inquiry into unresolved crimes relating to child sexual exploitation. Will the Minister join me in calling on the council to get on with that inquiry and to release information so that the victims can finally get justice?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. When he raised it before, he heard a clear “get on with it” message from the Home Secretary at the Dispatch Box. I repeat that, and I am more than happy to offer to meet him and anyone relevant to discuss the matter.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): Hon. Members will know from today’s papers that there has been yet another stabbing in London—this time in Kew in my constituency. I am pleased to say that the victim is now expected to make a full recovery and I thank the local police for their full and rapid response. Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge, please, that increased crime in the capital is a source of huge anxiety? Will he reassure my constituents not only that getting to grips with it is a top Government priority, but that he is doing everything he can to work with both the Met and the Mayor of London on a co-ordinated and full response?

Mr Hurd: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance, because it is one of the biggest public safety challenges that we face as a city and as a country. I am meeting the Mayor later this evening to discuss this in person. My hon. Friend wants more resources: an additional £100 million of investment is going into the Met police this year and the proposed funding settlement will see an additional £172 million of public money going in to support the Met. That is alongside all the other work that we are doing on the Offensive Weapons Bill, stop-and-search and everything else that he wants to see. I cannot think of a higher priority for the Department at this moment.

Immigration

4. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What plans he has for the UK’s future immigration system. [908647]

6. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What plans he has for the UK’s future immigration system. [908650]

11. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What plans he has for the UK’s future immigration system. [908655]

17. Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What plans he has for the UK’s future immigration system. [908662]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): On 19 December last year, the Government published a White Paper that set out our principles and plans for a future skills-based immigration system. The future system will focus on high-skills, welcoming talented and hard-working individuals who will support the UK’s dynamic economy and enabling employers to compete on the world stage.

David Duguid: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response. When we leave the common fisheries policy, as he will be aware, we take back control of our waters and our fish. We can expect at that point an expansion of the seafood processing sector in my constituency of Banff and Buchan, an area of very low unemployment. Will he therefore assure me that our future immigration policy will, if required, facilitate the sourcing of skilled seafood processing workers from outside the UK?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the opportunities that Brexit will bring for certain industries. I can assure him that the immigration White Paper does contain proposals to bring medium-skilled workers into the scope of skilled workers and also to introduce a temporary workers’ route at all skill levels. I hope that offers him some reassurance.

Jeremy Lefroy: Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the skills-based immigration system will not fall foul of an arbitrary salary cap? This is important in many sectors. In research—I declare an interest as I am on the board of a university—very highly skilled researchers are often not paid anything like £30,000 at the beginning of their career, but we need them for our university and research sector.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. He may know that we made our visa offer for academics even more generous last year. Those changes have been warmly welcomed by the research community. I can assure him that we will engage with employers in the higher education sector and others before we determine any future salary thresholds.

Gillian Keegan: Chichester is home to a fresh food industry worth £1 billion, and its businesses rely on European workers. One grower in my constituency reached 1.5 million picking hours last year, and with no mechanical alternative for picking soft fruit, any restriction in accessing labour will curtail growth. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that our post-Brexit immigration policy will ensure that such businesses will be able to get the workers that they need?

Sajid Javid: I understand the importance of the fresh food industry to my hon. Friend’s constituency. We are piloting a scheme to bring in workers from outside the EU to work in this industry, and our immigration White Paper proposed a temporary work route, allowing workers to come to the UK to work in jobs for up to a year at any skill level.

Julian Sturdy: Will the Secretary of State assure me that he will listen to North Yorkshire farmers and those in the agricultural sector who wish to retain access to seasonal workers after Brexit? Will he confirm how the pilot will be assessed and that changes to numbers will be reviewed?

Sajid Javid: I can tell my hon. Friend that, first, the pilot will test the effectiveness of our immigration system, alleviating seasonal labour shortages during peak periods.
of production while ensuring that there is a minimal impact on local communities. We will fully assess the outcome of the pilot, but I am happy to give him the assurance that he seeks.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is impossible to consider the future of the immigration system without considering the injustices that the immigration system has meted out in the past. In relation to the compensation scheme for Windrush citizens who have been unjustly and unlawfully treated by the Home Office, is the Home Secretary aware of reports that unscrupulous law firms are approaching Windrush victims and seeking to represent them in relation to the compensation scheme on the basis of a commission rate of more than 25% of the compensation awarded? Will he condemn that utterly predatory and exploitative of more than 25% of the compensation awarded? Will he condemn that utterly predatory and exploitative practice and take steps to ensure that 100% of the compensation awarded by that scheme, when it is finalised, will go to the victims, who have already suffered enough?

Sajid Javid: It is very important that we have a fair compensation scheme in place. The work that Martin Forde, QC, has done independently is excellent; we will announce more on that soon. I join the hon. Lady in condemning those unscrupulous firms that are thinking only about lining their pockets, and not about the victims.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary say what progress he has made regarding compensation for victims of the Windrush scandal?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that a consultation on the subject recently closed; it was extended at the request of Martin Forde, the independent chairman appointed to look into the matter. We are now working through the responses across Government, and we will announce more details soon.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Tens of thousands of families have been split by the Prime Minister’s draconian anti-family immigration rules. How many more families will be destroyed by the Home Secretary’s proposals to extend those rules to EU family members? Should we not be getting rid of these rules, rather than extending them?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that in the withdrawal agreement in the Prime Minister’s deal, there is an extensive section on guaranteeing citizens’ rights. I believe that what we have agreed with the EU is very generous. No one has any interest in splitting any families. We must do everything we can to welcome those EU citizens who have made their home in the United Kingdom.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Can the Home Secretary tell us how the settled status scheme will work for EU nationals ordinarily resident in the United Kingdom, but working in the offshore oil and gas industry, or the merchant marine? Can he confirm that the fact that many of those people work outside the 12-mile limit for more than six months in the year will not be a barrier to their inclusion in the settled status scheme?

Sajid Javid: One of the reasons why we piloted the scheme was to look at any issues that might come up before the full launch, which is expected in April. The pilot has just closed; we published the results today. It looks at precisely such issues as the one that the right hon. Gentleman has brought up. We will look into that carefully.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): This morning, the Government launched the largest stage of the settled status roll-out. If just 5% of those who need settled status fail to apply for it, 175,000 people in the UK will have insecure immigration status, or no status at all. The British Medical Association found that 37% of EU doctors are not even aware of the settled status scheme. What are the Government doing to make sure that EU citizens know that they need to register for settled status to avoid a repeat of the Windrush scandal?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman might be interested to know that in a recent test—we have just published the results—out of 30,000 applicants, 70% were granted settled status; 30% were granted pre-settled status. None was refused. Almost 80% said that they found the application process very fair and easy to complete, so the process is working well, although he is right to highlight the question of what it might look like once it is fully open. We are making sure, through a huge comms campaign, that we get through to everyone who needs to know about the scheme. We are, for example, working with employers; I visited one such employer, GSK, just last week.

Immigration Detention Estate

5. Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What recent assessment has he made of the size of the (a) current and (b) future immigration detention estate; and if he will make a statement.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government are committed to using the detention estate sparingly, and only when necessary. We have taken a systematic approach to modernising and rationalising the detention estate, so that we ensure that we have the geographical footprint and resilience required to meet our future needs. By this summer, the detention estate will be almost 40% smaller than four years ago, and of significantly higher quality.

Layla Moran: I welcome very much the closure of Campsfield House; I have been campaigning for its closure for a very long time. However, it happened very quickly, so lots of workers are now worried about where they will find a job. The local community is desperate to know the plans for the site once Campsfield is totally run down.

Caroline Nokes: I am glad that the hon. Lady identified her involvement with the Close Campsfield campaign. I am conscious that she was at many of the protests calling for the closure of Campsfield. We are developing options for the future use of the site following the end of the contract, which was, in any case, scheduled to end in May 2019. Although the employment of Mitie staff is a question for Mitie, the company has provided assurances that it is actively engaged with its staff on
redeployment options within its business. All detainees have been transferred to other centres where they will be held in decent and dignified conditions.

**EU Settlement Scheme**

7. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the EU settlement scheme. [908651]

**The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes):** The hon. Lady raises the question of how the EU settlement scheme is working. Of course, we know that EU citizens make a huge contribution to our economy and society, and we want them to stay. The first two phases of beta testing have successfully concluded, and the wider public implementation of the scheme has gone live today.

**Alison Thewliss:** I have received a worrying pattern of news about EU citizens in my constituency being denied universal credit because they are deemed not to have the right to reside. This is happening despite the Department for Work and Pensions having access to work history records and other evidence to the contrary. Is this an example of the hostile environment extending to EU citizens before Brexit has even happened, and will the EU settlement scheme have any impact on this?

**Caroline Nokes:** The EU settlement scheme is a really crucial part of making sure that the 3.4 million EU citizens living here can absolutely evidence their right to stay here through a digital status in line with 21st-century requirements. The hon. Lady will have heard my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary talk in positive terms about how important this scheme is. We have now opened the final phase of testing before the whole scheme goes live at the end of March.

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): The Government are right to be working hard to secure a Brexit deal, but if no deal is reached, can my right hon. Friend reassure EU citizens living in our county of Hampshire and elsewhere in the UK that their rights will still be guaranteed? This is important and it needs to be clear, not just to citizens but to businesses as well.

**Caroline Nokes:** Picking up on the final part of my right hon. Friend’s question, last summer we launched the employer toolkit to enable employers best to communicate to their employees the settled status scheme. She is right to point out the concerns that many may have about the event of no deal. I would like to reassure her that across Government we are working incredibly hard to avoid a no-deal outcome. However, the Department for Exiting the European Union was very clear about the protections afforded to EU citizens in the event of no deal, and we believe that our offer to them is generous. Deal or no deal, the scheme will open publicly at the end of March, and it is crucial that as many citizens as possible apply.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that this is an increasingly complex area. I have had many letters from constituents concerned that they will be impacted by the immigration health surcharge. Who is going to have to pay this, and is it going to be increased along the lines foreshadowed in the press?

**Caroline Nokes:** The hon. Gentleman will know that we did increase the immigration health surcharge. That was an important manifesto commitment that the Conservative party made to make sure that those who are using NHS services are also contributing to the NHS. The settled status scheme has deliberately been designed to be simple, not complicated. It is really important that EU citizens only have to prove their identity, prove their residence, and confirm that they do not have criminality. In the second phase of private beta testing, it has been very plain that the vast majority of people going through the scheme—in the region of 80% or so, I believe—have been able to confirm their residence of five years without any reference to additional information other than their records with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs or their DWP records.

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the Scottish economy of the policies set out in the White Paper, “The UK’s future skills-based immigration system”. [908652]

**The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes):** The Government’s immigration White Paper sets out the principles of an immigration system that will work in the best interests of the whole of the UK. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made clear, the White Paper is the start of the conversation. I look forward to ongoing engagement with stakeholders in Scotland over the course of this year.

**Martyn Day:** The Scottish policy chair at the Federation of Small Businesses has said: “The UK Government’s obstinate approach to immigration is a clear threat to many of Scotland’s businesses and local communities. These proposals will make it nigh impossible for the vast majority of Scottish firms to access any non-UK labour and the skills they need to grow and sustain their operations.” Is he wrong?

**Caroline Nokes:** The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the importance of our engaging with business groups and stakeholders across Scotland. I was delighted to meet the CBI in Scotland in a business roundtable back
in the summer, and that engagement will continue. I would also like to point out that the independent Migration Advisory Committee was very much of the view that Scotland’s economic situation is not sufficiently different from the rest of the UK to justify a very different migration policy.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister accept that the idea of a skills-based immigration system is undermined by having an arbitrary salary threshold, which should be scrapped in favour of an honest assessment of the real skills demand across different sectors in the economy?

**Caroline Nokes**: I would gently point out that it was not an arbitrary salary threshold; it was the one put forward by the independent Migration Advisory Committee. It is, of course, important that we engage with business and employers across the whole of the United Kingdom, and we will use the next 12 months to do so.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) has referred to the concerns of the policy chair of the Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland. The chief executive of the Scottish Tourism Alliance, Marc Crothall, has said:

“There is no doubt that the government’s plans will exacerbate the existing recruitment crisis considerably, placing our tourism industry and what is one of the most important economic drivers for Scotland in severe jeopardy.”

Is he wrong as well?

**Caroline Nokes**: The hon. and learned Lady will be aware that the Migration Advisory Committee, which is independent of Government, made the point that it did not see the case for a wide range of sectoral schemes. In fact, it made the case that perhaps only in agriculture are there major areas of policy can be devolved and implemented to suit Scotland’s needs, and I look forward to Scotland doing likewise.

**Joanna Cherry**: Clearly the tourism industry in Scotland are very unhappy with the proposals, and I beg to suggest that they know more about their industry than the Migration Advisory Committee. The reality of the situation is that people in businesses across Scotland are dismayed by the UK Government’s approach to immigration. Scotland already has different policies and approaches on taxation, climate change, tuition fees and social care. If those major areas of policy can be devolved and implemented to suit Scotland’s needs, why can immigration not be devolved? I would like to know the Minister’s views, rather than the Migration Advisory Committee’s views.

**Caroline Nokes**: I am sure the hon. and learned Lady recalls my appearance before her at a Select Committee, where I made it clear that my view was that immigration policy was a matter reserved to the United Kingdom Government.

**Fire Services**

9. **Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the correlation between changes in the number of firefighters and fire service response times.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service **(Mr Nick Hurd)**: Response times to fire have increased gradually over the last 20 years. At the same time, as the hon. Lady knows, the number of fires and deaths from fire has, thankfully, fallen. There is no clear link between response times and firefighter numbers.

**Laura Pidcock**: I thank the Minister for his response, but last month a report by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services found that fragmentation was resulting in a postcode lottery of 999 response times and standards, which simply is not fair on the public or on firefighters. What steps is the Minister taking to introduce a consistent national framework of standards across fire and rescue services, to provide a proper benchmark against which inspections can take place?

**Mr Hurd**: The independent inspection of the effectiveness of our fire service found that 10 of the 14 fire services inspected were rated good for effectiveness, including their response to emergencies. We are driving up standards and finding out what “good” looks like through independent inspection, the creation of the standards board and robust local accountability, including the chance for local police and crime commissioners to take over governance. That framework will drive up standards across the fire service, which is what everyone wants.

**Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): Rising response times are not the fault of firefighters, chief fire officers or local politicians. They are the result of this Government’s austerity agenda, which has led to 10,000 fewer firefighters protecting our communities. Council leaders such as those in South Yorkshire, where £12.5 million has been slashed since 2010, have explained to the Minister that this Government’s austerity measures will risk the public’s safety—they have made that clear. Will he explain how sustained cuts to fire service budgets, which force a reliance on small, one-off, un-earmarked—note the distinction—reserves, provide a sufficient basis for a responsive and well-resourced service? Will he commission a review?

**Mr Hurd**: I would say to the hon. Lady that we have fewer firefighters because we have had 46% fewer fires over the past decade. What I would also say to her, which I said to all the fire chiefs this morning, is that I am absolutely determined that, in the next comprehensive spending review, the fire service gets the resource it needs to continue to be world class.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): I met the chief fire officer and the chair of the fire and rescue authority in Nottinghamshire on Friday, and they made no complaint about their funding level. They have had to make a series of reductions, and they have done it extremely well, without any risks increasing at all to the people of Nottinghamshire. They want to make sure that their funding is retained, and I do not expect the Minister to
comment on that. However, does he agree with me that our fire services have done remarkable things, with cuts in their budgets, without any risk to the public at all?

Mr Hurd: I said exactly that to the fire chiefs today. Through austerity, they have made changes, and they should be commended on their leadership during that period. Their spending power will grow by 2.2% next year, and they sit on reserves worth 42% of their spending power. I repeat to my right hon. Friend what I said to them today: I am determined to ensure that, in the CSR, our fire service is properly resourced.

Economic Crime

12. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle economic crime.

Mr Wallace: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. It is in all our interests to ensure that our financial sector and country tackle financial crime. The global scale of it demands that all of us play our part to burden-share, which is why the serious and organised crime strategy last year specifically committed to ensuring the widest response from both Government and the private sector.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to clarify some of his remarks. First, those orders were not introduced—enacted—until April last year, so they have not been used for a year; and two, not one, have been used. At the same time, the Criminal Finances Act 2017 brought into existence asset-freezing orders. In one year, since April, we have seen asset-freezing orders used 200 times alone in the Metropolitan police, freezing over £40 million. I assure him that the use of unexplained wealth orders will continue. However, he will know as a lawyer that the courts and the judiciary have to get used to understanding them, and we have to understand how the courts interpret the legislation; but he should not worry, the asset-freezing orders are doing their job, as will the unexplained wealth orders.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): We have reformed and strengthened the powers available to local areas to tackle antisocial behaviour, including vandalism, through the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Six powers are available to the police, local councils and other agencies, including the civil injunction and public spaces protection orders, which set out how a public space can be used.

Andrea Jenkyns: Over the Christmas period, the Outwood memorial hall in my constituency was vandalised, the community centre and war memorial were damaged, and the possessions stolen include a wheelchair used by the Outwood stroke club. This is a truly sickening crime that has caused great distress to our community. What plans does my hon. Friend have to increase the sentences for those found guilty of such offences?

Victoria Atkins: I am sure that the whole House is sorry to hear about that appalling incident, and I fully understand the distress that it must have caused my hon. Friend’s constituents. Everyone has the right to feel safe in their local community. Robust legislation is in place to tackle such crimes, from the antisocial-behaviour powers in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, to criminal damage offences—and, indeed, violence offences, if those are appropriate on the facts of the case.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Residents and businesses in Hoyland have recently been subjected to a distressing wave of serious crime, including vandalism, break-ins and theft. That reflects the fact that there are nearly 600 fewer South Yorkshire police officers on our streets as a result of this Government’s cuts. Can the Minister confirm that Barnsley will not get a penny from the Government in this year’s funding settlement to recruit more frontline officers? Will she think again?

Victoria Atkins: I am sorry to hear about the experiences in the hon. Lady’s constituency and I hope that she will therefore be supporting the Government’s funding settlement, which is coming towards us and will help give up to £970 million more to policing, with the help of police and crime commissioners.

Online Crime: Company Responsibility

18. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that tech companies tackle serious crimes perpetrated on their platforms.

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): Tackling serious crime online is one of our highest priorities. We are increasing our investment in law enforcement and will set out plans to legislate in the online harms White Paper, jointly led by the Home Office and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. It will set clear responsibilities for tech companies to keep UK citizens safe online, including protection from serious online crime.
John Lamont: Technology is at the root of a great deal of serious crime in the United Kingdom. I know that the Minister understands that and will want to work with tech firms to fight against crime committed online. However, does he rule out the suggestion made by some people, including Sir Timothy John Berners-Lee, the inventor of the worldwide web, that if significant change is not forthcoming from the tech firms, we should regulate them?

Mr Wallace: Sir Tim Berners-Lee is ultimately right in the sense that, yes, if communications service providers fail to respond to abuse of the internet, they will need to see an increase in existing regulation. We are considering a full range of possible solutions to address the issue, including a regulatory framework as well as broader legal and regulatory changes, where necessary.

Violent Crime

19. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle serious violent crime. [908664]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): We launched the serious violence strategy last year; it has culminated in detailed work, stretching across Government. It includes the Offensive Weapons Bill and the serious violence taskforce. In addition, we want to build resilience for young people into the future, so we will be launching a £200 million youth endowment fund to intervene on children and young people at risk of serious violence. Shortly, we will consult on a new duty to underpin the multi-agency approach on public health.

Henry Smith: Sussex police and crime commissioner Katy Bourne was recently successful in getting a grant of almost £1 million from the Home Office—I thank the Department for that—to specifically address serious offences among young people. May I have an assurance that Crawley will continue to remain a focus of such support to combat serious offences?

Victoria Atkins: I congratulate police and crime commissioner Katy Bourne; it is always a pleasure to work with her. That was one of 29 projects awarded a total of nearly £18 million from the early intervention youth fund. The project in Crawley helps engage positively with children under 18 at risk of committing serious violence. The project will establish a network of coaches, drawing together the various agencies working with those young people—again, very much underpinning our approach to tackling serious violence: that we should all be concerned about this matter and working together on it.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Home Office-funded Violence and Vulnerability Unit report of 2018 noted that a reduction in services that offer positive activities to young people, such as youth services and school clubs, has left a vacuum that gangs are moving into. Does the Minister agree that supporting vulnerable young people and protecting them from county lines requires a cross-departmental approach with funding to back it? That has all too often been missing under the austerity agenda.

Victoria Atkins: I am pleased that the hon. Lady recently met my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to discuss this issue. As she will know from the serious violence strategy, the taskforce and our intention to consult shortly on a public health duty, the Government take our work to tackle serious violence very seriously.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) was focused intently upon his electronic device, and I am sure he found it thoroughly captivating, but I gently point out to him that he has a question that is not unadjacent to that with which we are dealing now, and that he might care to shoehorn his inquiry into the present.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): No. 21, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No. What I mean is blunt it out now man!

21. Will Quince: Will the Minister join me in welcoming the £664,000 allocated to Essex from the Home Office early intervention youth fund? Will the Secretary of State keep the situation under review while ensuring that Essex police have the resources required to continue to tackle this issue?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted that Essex is one of 29 projects across the country that have received money under the early intervention youth fund. The project in Essex will help to support the violence and vulnerability project. As we know, it is the vulnerability of young people that often places them so starkly in the path of those gangsters who want to exploit them.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): After a worrying upward trend in violent crime in Tooting, I held a crime summit that brought together the police, local authorities and community groups. That kind of joined-up, multi-sector working is essential in tackling violent crime. Will the Minister tell me what the Government are doing to ensure that we work with local groups at the heart of the community to stamp out violent crime?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted that the hon. Lady has taken that approach in her constituency. I have to say that the Government are very much leading on it. I am delighted, for example, that the Mayor of London sits on the taskforce chaired by the Home Secretary. Our approach is that we cannot arrest our way out of this. We want to intervene at an early stage to stop these young people from getting into the clutches of these criminals in the first place.

Topical Questions

T1. Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The public testing phase of our EU settlement scheme was launched today. It is open to all resident EU citizens with a valid passport, allowing us to further test the scheme ahead of full roll-out by April.

We have also announced a significant increase in police funding for the next year. Police and crime commissioners are consulting on plans to recruit around 1,200 extra officers, which is potentially the biggest increase in officer numbers in 10 years.
Finally, we have published our draft domestic abuse Bill to support victims, tackle perpetrators and improve services.

Tracy Brabin: Like me and many others in north Kirklees, the Home Secretary will have been shocked and concerned to hear last week about the 55 local arrests in relation to child sex abuse. This vital investigation will put extra strain on the police and the local authority, whose resources are already stretched to breaking point. Will the Home Secretary give my constituents a cast-iron guarantee that the police will have the resources they need to protect victims in the long and short term? Will he also ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice, with which I am sure the House would agree?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that case. The Government, local police forces and others such as the National Crime Agency have a huge focus on child sexual exploitation and abuse. She has raised the horrific case in Kirklees. I assure her that we want to ensure that all the necessary resources are available. The recent police settlement for this year will certainly help, but there is more to be done, including with the tech giants and those who groom our children online.

T2. [908685] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the Home Secretary join me in welcoming the High Court judgment in the Kotey-Elsheikh case—they are also known as the ISIS Beatles? Does he believe that the judgment vindicates the position he took in the face of fierce criticism in the House and further afield?

Sajid Javid: I, of course, welcome the High Court judgment, which upholds my decision on all grounds. I hope that hon. Members who at the time claimed that my decision was inconsistent with long-standing Government policy take their time to reflect on it. With the situation changing on the ground in Syria as we speak, I will do all I can to protect our country and to bring suspected terrorists to justice.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government have finally announced that they have introduced the draft domestic abuse Bill. Cross-examination of survivors by perpetrators will now be outlawed, but more scrutiny of the family courts is needed. Will the Minister commit to including in the Bill an independent inquiry into the culture, practice and outcomes of the family courts in connection with child contact cases, and to listening to the children?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I thank the hon. Lady for her great example of cross-party consensus, which is very much to be welcomed at the moment. It is great to hear that she welcomes the introduction of this important draft Bill. It is a draft Bill because we will have pre-legislative scrutiny of it, and the idea that she has suggested I am sure will be looked at by the Joint Committee.

T4. [908687] Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Investigations by the Independent Office for Police Conduct can take many years, meaning that officers often put their lives on hold although two thirds of gross misconduct cases are subsequently not proven. Do Ministers share my concern about that, and what can be done to address it?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I certainly share my hon. Friend’s concern. There is widespread frustration among our police officers about that. She will share my view that, obviously, robust investigation of misconduct is important, but we want the IOPC to focus on the most serious cases and to process those investigations faster. That is exactly what we see happening.

T3. [908688] Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): The Home Office has a service standard to deal with indefinite leave to remain applications of six months, unless they are complex, when there is no timescale at all. Reviewing my casework, I noticed the worrying trend of cases being badged complex just before the six months, and therefore having no service standard at all. Will the Minister let me know the current percentage of applications that are badged complex compared with each of the previous eight years?

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The hon. Lady asks a very specific question about figures. I am very conscious that service standards can sometimes drive behaviours that we would not want to see, with caseworkers deliberately choosing cases that are less complex to deliver. Sometimes it has been the case that complex cases have not received the attention that we want. We are working incredibly hard in UK Visas and Immigration, across the piece of visas and applications for asylum and leave to remain, to ensure that we drive down waiting times. If she would like to see me to discuss any particular cases, I will be delighted to talk to her about them.

T5. [908688] Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): As the Minister might have seen, Oxford University recently suspended grants from telecoms firm Huawei due to security concerns. In the same week, Germany joined the growing number of our allies and intelligence partners by blocking the company from its 5G network. Will Britain take similar action?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise this. A cross-Government approach is looking at safeguarding our telecoms networks. It would be inappropriate for me to mention any particular company by name, but I can say that I very much share her concerns and I believe that we should work with our allies on a co-ordinated approach.

T7. [908691] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), last week we saw a further 55 arrests regarding historical and horrific child sexual offences in Kirklees. I have to press the Secretary of State: exactly when will we see the extra resources put into Kirklees so that those offences and others can be fully investigated and the victims of crime can have the necessary protection and support?

Sajid Javid: I want to make sure that police forces across the country, including West Yorkshire, have the resources that they need to deal with this priority. I am sure that the hon. Lady will welcome the draft police
settlement, which I think has an additional almost £30 million for her local force, which will go to help with that absolute priority.

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): The percentage of convictions secured for domestic abuse is at its highest since 2010. What more can the Department do to ensure that we get more prosecutions and thereby more convictions?

**Sajid Javid**: I have listened carefully to what my hon. Friend said. The resources and the settlement that has been announced, with the additional almost £1 billion for police forces in England and Wales, will certainly help, but more can be done making sure that the police have the powers that they need.

**T8. [908692] Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Last November, Tyne and Wear MPs joined together in Westminster Hall to raise the funding problems of the Tyne and Wear fire and rescue service. The Minister undertook to meet the chief fire officer. Will he update us on progress in resolving those problems?

**Mr Hurd**: I thank the hon. Lady—[Interruption]—and the House for that welcome. I recently met the leadership of Tyne and Wear, an excellently led force, and it will be receiving an increase in core spending of 1.5% this year. My undertaking to her, as to all fire chiefs, is that I will work with them to build the evidence base to put in a credible bid in next year’s comprehensive spending review to make sure that our fire service continues to be well resourced and world-class.

**Victoria Atkins**: Very much so. The Bill is just part of our response to tackling domestic abuse; there is a range of non-legislative measures as well. Including emotional abuse in the definition of domestic abuse will help victims of this terrible crime, and I would be delighted to meet my right hon. Friend.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In the remotest parts of the United Kingdom, EU health workers are filling vital roles that might otherwise remain unfilled. Will the Government assure me that these crucial people will be allowed to remain at no cost to themselves?

**Caroline Nokes**: The hon. Gentleman will know that, in the second private beta testing phase of the EU settled status scheme, we made a political priority of those working in NHS trusts and the universities sector. He is absolutely right to point out the vital role that EU citizens play within our health service, and of course he will have heard the Home Secretary and I say repeatedly that we want them to stay and are determined to make it as easy as possible for them to do so.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): People in Corby and east Northamptonshire want to see more police out on the beat, catching criminals and deterring crime. What difference does my right hon. Friend believe the additional funding recently announced will make to achieving that objective?

**Mr Hurd**: We are proposing the biggest increase in police funding since 2010. Almost every force in the country is now actively recruiting and delivering what the public want, which is more officers on the streets and more investigators bearing down on crime.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The National newspaper this morning reports on a female constituent who has been detained and is due to be removed tomorrow despite court papers having been lodged at the Court of Session at the start of the month. Is this the hostile environment in action, and either way will the Minister meet me urgently so that we can secure the immediate release of this constituent?

**Caroline Nokes**: I am, of course, very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this case. He will be conscious that it would be inappropriate for me to discuss it on the Floor of the House, but I will meet him privately immediately afterwards.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): In the coming months, fruit farmers in my constituency plan to welcome thousands of migrant workers from the European Union. Will my right hon. Friend assure...
me that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, these workers will still be able to come to make sure we can pick and pack our fruit?

**Caroline Nokes**: My hon. Friend will be aware that, in addition to the rights of EU citizens, which we have secured, we are also piloting a seasonal agricultural workers scheme for those in the soft fruit and growing industries, about which she has spoken to me several times. I am happy to reassure her that we wish that pilot to be successful and will work with her growers to make sure it is.

**James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): Mrs Amodio and her husband came to live in Bury over 60 years ago. Mrs Amodio had to sign the Official Secrets Act when she worked at Bury police station. Now retired, she and her husband have been told by this Government to register, apply and pay for settled status. She feels unwelcomed and angry. Will the Secretary of State confirm this policy, and what has he to say to them? Does he agree that we become lesser versions of ourselves as a country with such mean-spirited policies?

**Sajid Javid**: The Government have made it absolutely clear that we welcome all EU citizens who have made their homes here and have contributed so much to our nation. We want to have a scheme in place that shows they are welcome, and we will reflect on what is being said and see how we can continue to improve the scheme.
Leaving the European Union

3.35 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that the whole House will join me in condemning Saturday’s car bomb attack in Londonderry and in paying tribute to the bravery of the Northern Ireland police and the local community, who helped to ensure that everyone got to safety. This House stands together with the people of Northern Ireland in ensuring that we never go back to the violence and terror of the past.

Let me now turn to Brexit. Following last week’s vote, it is clear that the Government’s approach had to change, and it has. Having established the confidence of Parliament in this Government, I have listened to colleagues across Parliament from different parties and with different views. Last week I met the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the Westminster leaders of the Democratic Unionist party, the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru and the Green party, and Back Benchers from both sides of the House. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster also had a number of such meetings.

The Government have approached those meetings in a constructive spirit, without preconditions, and I am pleased that everyone whom we met took the same approach. I regret that the Leader of the Opposition has not chosen to take part so far, and I hope he will reflect on that decision. Given the importance of this issue, we should all be prepared to work together to find a way forward, and my ministerial colleagues and I will continue with further meetings this week.

Let me set out the six key issues that have been at the centre of the talks to date. The first two relate to the process for moving forward. First, there is widespread concern about the possibility of the UK’s leaving without a deal. There are those on both sides of the House who want the Government to rule that out, but we need to be honest with the British people about what that means. The right way to rule out no deal is for the House to approve a deal with the European Union, and that is what the Government are seeking to achieve. The only other guaranteed way to avoid a no-deal Brexit is to revoke article 50, which would mean staying in the EU.

There are others who think that what we need is more time, so they say that we should extend article 50 to give Parliament longer to debate how we should leave and what a deal should look like. That is not ruling out no deal, but simply deferring the point of decision, and the EU is very unlikely simply to agree to extend article 50 without a plan for how we are going to approve a deal. So when people say, “Rule out no deal”, what they are actually saying is that, if we in Parliament cannot approve a deal, we should revoke article 50. Those would be the consequences of what they are saying. I believe that that would go against the referendum result, and I do not believe that that is a course of action that we should take or one that the House should support.

Secondly, all the Opposition parties that have engaged so far, and some Back Benchers, have expressed their support for a second referendum. I have set out many times my deep concerns about returning to the British people for a second referendum. Our duty is to implement the decision of the first one. I fear that a second referendum would set a difficult precedent that could have significant implications for how we handle referendums in this country—not least, strengthening the hand of those who are campaigning to break up our United Kingdom. It would require an extension of article 50, and we would very likely have to return a new set of MEPs to the European Parliament in May. I also believe that there has not yet been enough recognition of the way in which a second referendum could damage social cohesion by undermining faith in our democracy. We do not know what the Leader of the Opposition thinks about this because he has not engaged, but I know there are Members who have already indicated that they wish to test the support of the House for this path. I do not believe there is a majority for a second referendum and, if I am right, then just as the Government are having to think again about their approach going forwards, so too do those Members who believe this is the answer.

The remaining issues raised in the discussions relate to the substance of the deal, and on these points I believe we can make progress. Members of this House, predominantly but not only on the Government Benches and the DUP, continue to express their concern on the issue of the Northern Ireland backstop. All of us agree that as we leave the European Union we must fully respect the Belfast agreement and not allow the creation of a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, or indeed a border down the Irish sea. And I want to be absolutely clear, in the light of media stories this morning: this Government will not reopen the Belfast agreement. I have never even considered doing so, and nor would I.

With regard to the backstop, despite the changes we have previously agreed, there remain two core issues: the fear that we could be trapped in it permanently and concerns over its potential impact on our Union if Northern Ireland is treated differently from the rest of the UK. So I will be talking further this week to colleagues, including in the DUP, to consider how we might meet our obligations to the people of Northern Ireland and Ireland in a way that can command the greatest possible support in the House. I will then take the conclusions of those discussion back to the EU.

From other parts of this House, concerns have also been raised over the political declaration. In particular, these have focused on a wish for further precision around the future relationship. The political declaration will provide the basis for developing our detailed negotiating mandate for the future and this new phase of negotiations will be different in a number of ways. It will cover a far broader range of issues in greater depth, and so will require us to build a negotiating team that draws on the widest expertise available, from trade negotiators to security experts and specialists in data and financial services. As we develop our mandate across each of these areas, I want to provide reassurance to the House. Given the breadth of the negotiations, we will seek input from a wide range of voices from outside Government. That must include ensuring Parliament has a proper say, and fuller involvement, in these decisions.

It is Government’s responsibility to negotiate, but it is also my responsibility to listen to the legitimate concerns of colleagues, both those who voted leave and those who voted remain, in shaping our negotiating mandate for our future partnership with the EU. So the Government will consult this House on their negotiating mandate, to ensure that Members have the chance to make their views known and that we harness the knowledge of all Select Committees across the full range of expertise.
needed for this next phase of negotiations, from security to trade. This will also strengthen the Government’s hand in the negotiations, giving the EU confidence about our position and avoiding leaving the bulk of parliamentary debate to a point when we are under huge time pressure to ratify.

I know that to date Parliament has not felt it has enough visibility of the Government’s position as it has been developed and negotiated. It has sought documents through Humble Addresses, but that mechanism cannot take into account the fact that some information when made public could weaken the UK’s negotiating hand. So as the negotiations progress, we will also look to deliver confidential Committee sessions that can ensure Parliament has the most up-to-date information, while not undermining the negotiations. We will regularly update the House, in particular before the six-monthly review points with the EU foreseen in the agreement.

While it will always be for Her Majesty’s Government to negotiate for the whole of the UK, we are also committed to giving the devolved Administrations an enhanced role in the next phase, respecting their competence and vital interests in these negotiations. I hope to meet both First Ministers in the course of this week and will use the opportunity to discuss this further with them, and we will also look for further ways to engage elected representatives from Northern Ireland and regional representatives in England. Finally, we will reach out beyond this House and engage more deeply with businesses, civil society and trade unions.

Fifthly, hon. Members from across the House—

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Prime Minister: Fifthly, hon. Members from across the House have raised strong views that our exit from the EU should not lead to a reduction in our social and environmental standards, and in particular workers’ rights. So I will ensure that we provide Parliament with a guarantee that not only will we not erode protection for workers’ rights and the environment, but we will ensure this country leads the way. To that end, my right hon. Friend. Friend the Business Secretary indicated the Government’s support for the proposed amendment to the meaningful vote put down by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), including that Parliament should be able to consider any changes made by the EU in these areas in future. My right hon. Friend and others will work with Members across the House, businesses and trade unions to develop proposals that give effect to this amendment, including looking at legislation where necessary.

Sixthly, and crucially, a number of Members have made powerful representations about the anxieties facing EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU who are waiting to have their status confirmed. We have already committed to ensuring that EU citizens in the UK will be able to stay and continue to access in-country benefits and services on broadly the same terms as now, in both a deal and a no-deal scenario. Indeed, the next phase of testing of the scheme for EU nationals to confirm their status has launched today. Having listened to concerns from Members, and organisations such as the 3million group, I can confirm today that, when we roll out the scheme in full on 30 March, the Government will waive the application fee so that there is no financial barrier for any EU nationals who wish to stay. Anyone who has applied, or will apply, during the pilot phase will have their fee reimbursed. More details about how this will work will be made available in due course.

Some EU member states have similarly guaranteed the rights of British nationals in a no-deal scenario, and we will step up our efforts to ensure that they all do so.

Let me briefly set out the process for the days ahead. In addition to this statement, today I will lay a written ministerial statement, as required under section 13(4) and (5) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, and table a motion in neutral terms on this statement, as required by section 13(6). This motion will be amendable and will be debated and voted on in this House on 29 January, and I will provide a further update to the House during that debate. To be clear, this is not a rerun of the vote to ratify the agreement we have reached with the European Union, but the fulfilment of the process following the House’s decision to reject that motion.

The process of engagement is ongoing. In the next few days, my ministerial colleagues and I will continue to meet Members on all sides of the House and representatives of the trade unions, business groups, civil society and others as we try to find the broadest possible consensus on a way forward. While I will disappoint those colleagues who hope to secure a second referendum, I do not believe that there is a majority in this House for such a path, and while I want to deliver a deal with the EU, I cannot support the only other way in which to take no deal off the table, which is to revoke article 50. So my focus continues to be on what is needed to secure the support of this House in favour of a Brexit deal with the EU.

My sense so far is that three key changes are needed. First, we will be more flexible, open and inclusive in how we engage Parliament in our approach to negotiating our future partnership with the European Union. Secondly, we will embed the strongest possible protections on workers’ rights and the environment. Thirdly, we will work to identify how we can ensure that our commitment to no hard border in Northern Ireland and Ireland can be delivered in a way that commands the support of this House and the European Union. In doing so, we will honour the mandate of the British people and leave the European Union in a way that benefits every part of our United Kingdom and every citizen of our country. I commend this statement to the House.

3.48 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for giving me an advance copy of her statement. I join her in condemning the car bomb attack in Londonderry at the weekend, and I commend the emergency services and local community for their response. The huge achievement of the Good Friday agreement in reducing violence in Northern Ireland must never be taken for granted. It was an historic step forward, and we cannot take it for granted.

The Government still appear not to have come to terms with the scale of the defeat in this House last week. The Prime Minister seems to be going through the motions of accepting the result, but in reality she is
in deep denial. The logic of that decisive defeat is that the Prime Minister must change her red lines, because her current deal is undeliverable, so can she be clear and explicit with the House—which of her red lines is she prepared to move on?

The Prime Minister's invitation to talks has been exposed as a PR sham. Every Opposition party politician came out of those meetings with the same response. Contrary to what the Prime Minister has just said, there was no flexibility and there were no negotiations—nothing has changed. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister was heard and, when there was noise, I called for it stop. The same must apply to the Leader of the Opposition. No one in this Chamber will shout the right hon. Gentleman down. They need not bother trying, because they are wasting their breath.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. However, I do welcome the commitment that the fee for EU citizens to apply for settled status will be waived.

The Prime Minister was fond of saying that this is the best possible deal on the table and that it is the only possible deal. However, our EU negotiating partners have been clear, saying that “unanimously, the European Council have always said that if the United Kingdom chooses to shift its red lines in the future... to go beyond a simple free trade agreement... then the European Union will be immediately ready... to give a favourable response.”

The House voted to hold the referendum and to trigger article 50. There is a clear majority in this House for EU citizens to apply for settled status will be waived.

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The first thing the Prime Minister must do is recognise the clear majority in this House against leaving without a deal. She must rule out no deal and stop the colossal waste of public money planning for that outcome. Questions must also be asked of the Chancellor. He reassured businesses that no deal would be ruled out by the Commons, yet he sanctioned £4.2 billion to be spent on an option that he believes will be ruled out. Last week, the Foreign Secretary said that it was “very unrealistic” to believe that the House of Commons would not find a way to block no deal. Will the Prime Minister meet with her Chancellor and Foreign Secretary to see whether they can convince her to do what is in her power and rule out no deal? If she will not do that now, will she confirm to the House that, if an amendment passes that rules out no deal, she will implement that instruction? The Prime Minister agreed the backstop because of her pledge to the people of Northern Ireland to avoid a hard border, but no deal would mean a hard border in Ireland and would break the Prime Minister’s commitment. Is she seriously willing to accept a hard border?

Today heralds the start of a democratic process whereby this House will debate the amendments that will determine how we navigate Brexit. Of course, the Government tried to block us ever getting to this stage. They wanted no democratic scrutiny whatsoever. Labour has set out a proposal—I believe there may be a majority in this House for this—for a new comprehensive customs union with the EU that would include a say and a strong single market deal that would deliver frictionless trade and ensure no race to the bottom on workers’ rights or any other of the important regulations and protections that we currently have. As we have said consistently from the beginning, we will back amendments that seek to rule out the disaster of no deal and, as we have said, we will not rule out the option of a public vote. No more phoney talks. Parliament will debate and decide, and this time I hope and expect the Government to listen to this House.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman says “no more phoney talks.” It would be nice just to have some talks with him on this issue. He makes lots of claims about what has been said in the talks that have been held so far but, actually, he does not know, because he did not turn up to those talks.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a great deal about the issue of no deal. He says that there is a consensus—a view across this House—that supports a deal in principle and wants to deliver on Brexit. That is exactly what I want to sit down and talk to him about. What we need to see is what it is that will secure the support of this House to enable us to leave the European Union with a deal. We are continuing to listen to groups across the House in order to find a way to secure that support.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about ruling out no deal. As I said in my statement, there are only two ways to ensure that a no deal does not happen: one is to revoke article 50, to reverse the decision of the referendum and to stay in the European Union, which would be a betrayal of the referendum decision in 2016; and the other way is to agree a deal with the European Union. It is precisely to find a way to secure the support of this House for a deal that I am talking to Members across the House and that I want to talk to the right hon. Gentleman. From what he has said today, I hope that he will reconsider his decision not to attend those talks.

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that we deliver on the referendum and protect their jobs. That is what the Government are about, that is what we are working on and that is what we will deliver.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): As a supporter of the withdrawal agreement last week, I welcome the Prime Minister’s acceptance of the need for change in the light of the result and her reassurance that she will not compromise on a permanently open border in Northern Ireland, and that therefore any discussions that she has with the hard right wing on the Irish backstop will not compromise the commitment to a permanently open border.

Will the Prime Minister also consider reaching out to those remainers who are not yet convinced of her agreement by at least relaxing—if she cannot do a U-turn—her normal rejection of a customs union? I do not see outside powers lining up to do trade agreements to compensate us for leaving Europe. Will she also consider relaxing her resistance to regulatory alignment with Europe? Regulatory alignment is not inconsistent with some tightening up, at least, of free movement of labour. I urge her to be flexible on every front, because there was a large majority against the proposal last week. There are probably more remainers who voted against her than there are Brexiteers, and she needs to reach out to those remainers.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend talks about some degree of regulatory alignment. He might not have noticed that, last summer, the Government put forward a proposal that included a degree of regulatory alignment, with a parliamentary lock on that regulatory alignment, and that the proposal raised concerns among a number of Members of this House. Some Members said that they did not consider the proposal to be the proper way forward.

I actually think that what we need in the future is a good trade relationship with the European Union. What we have in the political declaration is recognition that regulatory alignment and alignment with standards followed by the European Union are in balance with the question of checks at the border, and there is a spectrum of where that balance results. I have argued for frictionless trade; there are those in the European Union who have not accepted the concept of frictionless trade, but who do accept the concept of reducing friction at the border as far as possible.

My right hon. and learned Friend also said that he did not see potential trade deals with the rest of the world. Today, I had lunch with the Prime Minister of New Zealand and one of the topics we discussed was precisely a future trade deal between the United Kingdom and New Zealand—[Interruption.] Just before Opposition Members start talking about the size of New Zealand, that is not just a trade deal with New Zealand, but United Kingdom membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

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

All of us share the Prime Minister’s abhorrence and disgust at the bombing in Derry over the weekend. We are delighted that the efforts of the emergency services ensured that there was no loss of life. In the light of that incident, however, it was disturbing to see media reports this morning of at least the potential reopening of the Good Friday agreement. I welcome the Prime Minister’s comments this afternoon, but will she confirm that she will seek neither to amend or to add to the Good Friday agreement in any way? Many of us remember the dark days that Northern Ireland went through. This weekend’s attack was a frightening reminder of the fragility of the peace in Northern Ireland.

On the subject of talks, the Scottish National party entered willingly into talks with the Prime Minister last week, and we remain ready to engage in those talks on the basis that we can discuss pausing article 50, taking no deal off the table, and a people’s vote. The Prime Minister talks about “no preconditions”, but in the letters that have gone back and forth between the two of us, she insists that the United Kingdom must leave the European Union on 29 March. That is not consistent with a desire to discuss a people’s vote. All preconditions must be taken off the table if we are to engage in meaningful dialogue. We know that the Prime Minister’s strategy is now to run down the clock. There is no sign that she is interested in meaningful talks or meaningful change.

Prime Minister, take no deal off the table. She tells me that she has no desire for no deal. The Foreign Secretary has no desire for no deal. The Chancellor has no desire for no deal. The Leader of the Opposition has no desire for no deal. The SNP has no desire for no deal, and nor do the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru or the Greens. Let us stop this charade. To have a people’s vote, we would have to extend article 50. It is not true that the only option is to revoke it—although we would welcome that. After last week’s result—a defeat by 230 votes—the Prime Minister has not come here with fundamental change. This Government are a farce and an embarrassment, and their leadership is shambolic.

The Prime Minister must now step up. We must extend article 50 and end this impasse by bringing forward a second EU referendum. Do it for all sorts of reasons, but do it for the EU citizens living in the UK and now facing a registration scheme. I am grateful—I congratulate the Prime Minister—for the fact that fees have been waived for EU nationals, after a campaign led by the Scottish National party and our Government in Edinburgh, but it is shameful that people here, many of whom have been living here for decades, are being forced to register to stay in their own home. That is the fundamental fact. Not in our name. Where is the humanity of this?

We in Scotland have another choice. We did not vote for Brexit. We will not be dragged out of Europe by a Tory Government we did not vote for. We might not be able to save the UK, but we can save Scotland. We have an escape route from the chaos of Brexit: an independent Scotland. Scottish independence will result in our country being a destination in Europe—a country at the heart of Europe, while the rest of the UK turns inward, isolated from its European neighbours. We want no part of it.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises a number of issues. He talked about the Belfast agreement. As I said in my statement, this Government will not reopen the Belfast agreement. I have never considered
doing that and I would not do it. We remain committed to the Belfast agreement and to maintaining our commitments under it.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the question of no deal and running down the clock. We are not running down the clock. I brought to the House a deal that had been negotiated with the European Union, and the House has rejected that. I say once again to the right hon. Gentleman, as I did earlier to the Leader of the Opposition and to other Members, that it is very simple: he cannot wish away no deal. Either we stay in the European Union or we have a deal. I believe that it is right for us to leave the European Union because that was what people voted for in the referendum in 2016. If somebody does not want no deal, they have to be willing to agree a deal. The point about sitting down and talking with people across this House is to identify those issues on which it will be possible for us to make changes such that we can secure support around this House.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments about the announcement we made today about the fees for applications for citizens. I commend my hon. Friends the Members for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), but the issue was also raised by other Members across this House.

Finally, I will say to the right hon. Gentleman, as I have said before and will continue to say, that for the Scottish National party to stand up and say that the best economic future for Scotland is to be outside the United Kingdom is to fly—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hooray!”] Well, I have to say to every one of those Members who is cheering that thought that this is to fly in the face of economic reality, because the reality is—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hooray!”]

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I wonder whether the Prime Minister and, indeed, the Leader of the Opposition recognise that with just two months to go, the past week has shown that party politics and Westminster will not deliver a resolution on Brexit, because party politics is not the same as Brexit—it is separate from party politics—so the situation will not change and the House will not find a route forward. The Prime Minister talks about social cohesion, but surely the most divisive thing to do would be for Members to vote through her deal knowing that our communities simply do not want it. Is it not time for us all to be honest about the fact that Parliament has run out of road? We have been debating for two and a half years; we could debate for another two and a half years and we still would not reach a resolution on Brexit. The only people who can do that now, surely, are the British people.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the passion with which my right hon. Friend is campaigning on this particular issue, but she is assuming that it is not possible to reach an agreement that will secure the support of the House. The purpose of what we are doing at the moment in talking with parties and Back Benchers across this House is to find those issues—I have indicated issues in my statement—on which we can move and on which we can then find that support across the House. I believe it is right for us to continue to work for a deal to leave the European Union on 29 March, and for us to do so with a deal that has secured the support of this House.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): As a litmus test of the Prime Minister’s flexibility, may I ask whether, if the House voted for membership of a customs union, for example, she would implement that decision?

The Prime Minister: Of course, the point about what we are doing in terms of this process is identifying those issues on which there is agreement across the House and on which the support of the House can be secured, and dealing with that with the European Union, but while also being faithful to the vote that was cast in the referendum. I believe that when we look at this issue, everybody should not only say, “Should we be leaving the European Union?”, but recognise the reasons that lay behind the vote to leave the European Union and deliver on them.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, particularly the part in which she said that EU nationals would have their fee waived—the whole House should recognise that—and also her acceptance that there is to be no change to the Belfast agreement, as I recognise completely that that would have opened a can of worms. As someone who did not support the agreement last week, I welcome the fact that she has also made it clear that she will now go forward and seek further change. In doing that, she has given further thought to the idea that, although she would remain absolutely in complete overall charge, she could insert a senior politician in those day-to-day negotiations to ensure that the political ramifications are taken carefully into consideration?

The Prime Minister: The negotiations at this stage are for politicians. Indeed, I will continue to have a role, as will the Secretary of State, as we go forward. What we need to ascertain is where we can ensure that we can secure the support of this House for a deal, and then take that forward to the European Union.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I, too, welcome the fee waiver and the Prime Minister’s willingness to engage in serious conversations, including about the merits and practicalities of a people’s vote. May I ask a specific question? At the end of last week, the Secretary of State for Defence put 3,500 troops on Brexit standby. Will she clarify what their rules of engagement would be in the event that they face angry and violent demonstrators, and would they be armed?

The Prime Minister: It is of course right that the Government are taking the necessary contingency arrangements for the situation. The right hon. Gentleman will find that we are talking about those troops perhaps being able to relieve others who are undertaking roles such as the guarding of certain sites. That is what we are talking about.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On the vital issue of UK tax policy, will my right hon. Friend also reconsider the provisions under which the United Kingdom will embrace EU state aid rules? With the European Commission supervising our Competition and Markets
Authority, a veto will be given to the Commission over future tax incentives for investment developments such as free ports, airports, and industrial and enterprise zones.

The Prime Minister: If my hon. Friend looks back at the discussions that have taken place in the European Union, he will see that it has often been the United Kingdom that has been promoting fair competition, including in relation to state aid rules. The question of those state aid rules and what will be included in any future trade agreement with the European Union is, of course, a matter that we look at in detail in the next stage of the negotiations.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister seems to be talking as if she lost by 30 votes, not 230. She says that she wants to give Parliament a say on the political declaration and the future partnership but, to be honest, we have heard all that before. If she is serious, why not give Parliament a say before we finish the article 50 negotiations, not after? Why not put to Parliament some votes on her red lines, including on a customs union; otherwise, how can any of us believe a word she says?

The Prime Minister: As I have set out, the correct process, which is provided for under the legislation, is that there will be a neutral motion next week, which will be amendable. There will be Members across the House who wish to put down amendments that may reflect different views across the House in relation to different matters. We will, of course, continue to work on this, and when the Leader of the Opposition said that we were denying any democratic involvement in the process—

[Interruption.] The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) says from a sedentary position that, yes, we were. Actually, no, even when we get the support of this House for a deal, there will still be the process of legislating to ensure that that deal is put in place, and this House will play a role in that legislation.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his decision to waive the registration fee for EU nationals—I think that that will be very welcome—and also on her determination now to go back to Brussels and fix the backstop, because that is the way forward. Will she confirm that, in so doing, she will now seek legally binding change to the text of that backstop and to the text of the withdrawal agreement itself?

The Prime Minister: We are exploring with Members across this House the nature of any movement on the backstop that would secure the support of this House. A number of options have been raised with us by Members across the House. We need to look at those, and to continue to talk with colleagues—with those who have raised the issue from the Government Back Benches, and those who have done so from the Opposition Benches, and particularly, obviously, our confidence and supply partners. There are a number of options; we will look to see what will secure the support of the House.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I join the Prime Minister in her words about the despicable and reckless attack in Londonderry at the weekend? It was carried out, of course, by the republican terrorists responsible for the murder of prison officers David Black in 2012 and Adrian Ismay in March 2016. These people have nothing to offer anyone in Northern Ireland, and are rejected right across the board.

On Brexit, I thank the Prime Minister for our meetings in recent days, the good engagement there has been, her recognition that core issues to do with the withdrawal agreement need to be sorted out, her willingness to try to reach a consensus, and the fact that she will go back to Brussels and ask for the necessary changes to be made. Can I take it from what she says that she is really serious about getting a consensus that can get this through the House, with the necessary legal changes to the withdrawal agreement?

The Prime Minister: Yes; I can give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance that, obviously, what I want to do is identify the way forward in dealing with the issues raised about the backstop. In my statement, I referenced the two key issues: its potential permanency, and the impact on the Union. I want to find a way to resolve those issues that will command support from this House.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister warmly for having listened to the concerns that I and other Members have raised on the issue of EU nationals. Given the good will that she has shown on the issue, will she remind the EU of its promises to reciprocate, and will she encourage the EU27 to remove any fees that its member states charge UK citizens?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised a very important point. While it is important for us to give that reassurance to EU citizens here, we must also remember the EU citizens living in the EU27 member states; we will be pressing member states to give reciprocal commitments to UK citizens living there. A number of states have already committed to various ways in which they will provide protection of rights in a no-deal situation. We will continue to press them all to reciprocate.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Last Wednesday, the Prime Minister said to the House that she would reach out to try to find a way forward on the crisis facing our country, but having listened to her statement, I am sorry to say that while her door may have been open, her mind has remained closed. She has rejected stopping us leaving the EU with no deal, even though she knows that no deal would be disastrous, and she has rejected remaining in a customs union, even though she knows it is an essential contribution to keeping an open border and maintaining friction-free trade. Last Wednesday, the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union published a report identifying a number of alternative ways forward, and recommended that they be put to the House in a series of indicative votes. Given that the Prime Minister has twice asked this afternoon, “Well, what will secure the support of the House?”, will she put those proposals to the vote?
The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman knows that the Government will table a neutral motion next Tuesday; that is what is required under the legislation. That is an amendable motion. He again referenced the issue of rejecting no deal. As I said earlier, if people do not want no-deal, there are only two ways to go. [Interruption.] It is no good hon. Members chuntering or shouting about this issue from a sedentary position. The sheer facts are that no deal will only be taken off the table either by revoking article 50, which turns back the result of the referendum—the Government will not do that—or by having a deal, and that is what we are trying to work out.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Today, the shadow International Trade Secretary visited my constituency and said to the BBC: “If there is a motion for a second referendum that is put before Parliament, our position as a party is that we would be supporting a public vote.”

Does the Prime Minister agree with me—and, I am sure, many Brexiteers in the north of England—that a second referendum would be a sell-out and cause a huge amount of harm to trust in politicians?

The Prime Minister: I do agree with my hon. Friend. A lot of people voted for the first time, or for the first time in many years, in the referendum in 2016, and I think their faith in politicians would be shattered if we failed to deliver on that vote. We have a duty to deliver on that vote in the referendum.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Prime Minister could reach out by relaxing her own self-imposed red lines, including thinking about other solutions such as staying in the customs union, which would deal with the backstop situation, but she seems intent on trying to get her dead deal through the House by playing chicken with her own Brexiteers and what she calls her confidence and supply partners. Will she, first, tell us that she really does want to reach out? Secondly, will she tell the House this: if we do amend the motion next Tuesday, will she respect that decision and put it into effect?

The Prime Minister: Of course, as I have said, it is possible for people to move amendments to the motion next Tuesday. We wanted to sit down with all parties and with different groups across the House, because there are different opinions on these issues in parties across this House, and find out where it will be possible to secure support for a deal that forward to ensure that we leave with a deal, but underpinning that, of course, is the importance of us delivering on the referendum. I believe that it is a duty for this Parliament to deliver on the referendum, to deliver Brexit, and to deliver a Brexit with a deal.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I think a majority of voters in the referendum voted to leave and did not vote to sign a new comprehensive treaty binding us back into features of the EU. However, I think a big majority in the country would welcome a comprehensive free trade agreement, and use of article XXIV of the general agreement on tariffs and trade, while we are negotiating it, so when my right hon. Friend goes back to Brussels, will she table such a comprehensive free trade agreement and see if that breaks the logjam?

The Prime Minister: We have been looking at a free trade area—a free trade agreement—with the European Union. I just want to ensure that that is as ambitious as possible, and that is what is set out in the political declaration.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The only thing we know for certain that people voted for in the referendum was to leave the EU—any other speculation is simply that. I repeat the question that my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) put earlier. Amazingly, the Prime Minister did not even mention the words “customs union” in her statement, but if this House voted either to remain in a customs union or to remain in EFTA or the EEA—all issues that were raised with her by her own MPs when she met them last week—will she adhere to that?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, obviously it will be for people to amend the motion that takes place next week and to see whether there is—[Interruption.] Can I just say to the hon. Lady that she is making some assumptions about the views of people across this House that have not been reflected by the discussions that we have had with Members across this House?

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to reject ruling out no deal. May I also say that for those of us like me who did not support the Government’s withdrawal agreement on the basis of the backstop, if she can return from Brussels with something that is legally enforceable on this one area, I believe that she will carry most of the House with her?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comment. It has been clear in the conversations we have had that, in terms of the specifics of the withdrawal agreement, the backstop is the issue. That is why we will be working hard to find a resolution of it.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Prime Minister knows that farming is integral to Welsh heritage. It is the beating heart of our rural economy. She must also understand that when she humours the idea of a no-deal Brexit, she freezes the heart’s blood of our communities. When I meet Welsh farmers this week, on what grounds can I possibly assure them that Westminster defends their interests, given that the Prime Minister would evidently prefer no deal to a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: I have given my response on the issue of a people’s vote or second referendum. After we negotiated the deal with the European Union, I was pleased to meet Welsh farmers, and they supported the deal and believed that it would be a good deal for them.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Bearing in mind that the Leader of the Opposition has a reputation for meeting almost any organisation in the world, my constituents found it distasteful that he was not prepared to give up his time to meet the Prime Minister.

The House has given the Prime Minister instructions on a number of occasions. It has given the Government an instruction about holding a referendum and the date
[Sir Patrick McLoughlin]

that we leave the European Union. Will she assure the House that she is doing her utmost to carry out those commands?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I think that a number of people are surprised at the unwillingness of the Leader of the Opposition to meet me, as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, when he has met other groups who do not have the national interest of this country at heart. As my right hon. Friend says, I am absolutely working to deliver on the instruction of this Parliament to leave the European Union on 29 March.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister ruling out a second referendum, ruling out revoking article 50 and leaving on the table a WTO deal, whether managed or not. However, this is a remain Parliament—the majority of Members of this Parliament voted to remain. Does she agree that one way to show we are honouring what the people said is to speed up the progress of statutory instruments and legislation that need to get through this Parliament, so that we can get out on 29 March?

The Prime Minister: We have been laying statutory instruments. Getting statutory instruments through the House requires the usual channels to work together, and I am sure that those on the Labour Front Bench have heard the hon. Lady’s interest in ensuring that those statutory instruments are able to get through the House.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement and support her determination to return to Brussels to secure changes, particularly to the backstop. Given what she said in her statement, may I urge her to rule out not only revoking article 50 but extending it? That would give businesses certainty and give the public some finality and reassurance that we will leave at the end of March, as promised.

The Prime Minister: I hope I can give my right hon. Friend the reassurance that I am working to find a deal that will secure the support of this House, such that we can and will leave the European Union on 29 March.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is now clear that the Prime Minister is counting on the House of Commons to rule out her red lines because she lacks the political authority to do so. Whether it is her dead deal, no deal, Norway or no Brexit, all the options that lie ahead are substantially different from what people were promised before the referendum. Given that, does she accept that there is not only a practical desire for a new referendum, to break the parliamentary deadlock, but a moral imperative, to ensure that it is the people who agree this country’s future for generations to come?

Mr Speaker: I apologise that I did not have an immediate recall of the fact, but I wish the hon. Gentleman a happy birthday, and I observe—probably not for the first time or the last—that he seems to be a very youthful fellow.

The Prime Minister: I am happy to echo the many happy returns to the hon. Gentleman.

When people voted in the referendum, they voted to leave the European Union and to ensure that free movement came to an end. There were those who voted to ensure that we had an independent trade policy, those who voted to ensure there was no remit of the European Court of Justice here in the United Kingdom and those who were concerned about the money sent every year to the European Union. It is important that this Parliament focuses on delivering on those.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): May I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement, particularly her commitment to waive the fee required to be paid by European citizens and her commitment to reach out, cross-party, in pursuit of a Brexit deal? We have to honour that referendum. Does she agree with me that while the position of the Leader of the Opposition on Brexit is crystal clear—he is for leave up north and remain down south—many Back-Bench Labour colleagues who have very serious Brexit-voting constituencies are looking for a way to honour the referendum result with us? Will she support those talks in trying to find a moderate, sensible, orderly Brexit that can deliver for the majority of the British people?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing out the inconsistencies in the position of the Leader of the Opposition on this particular issue. I am working to ensure that we can deliver and find such a way through that enables us to leave the European Union, to leave in a smooth and orderly way, to leave with a deal and to leave with a deal that is good for people across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): The Prime Minister is spending time reaching out to the House of Commons. Might we have a chance to reach out to her? During her statement, she made a number of assertions about what the opinions of this House were, but none of us knows what the opinions of this House are. When I table an amendment on indicative votes, might the Prime Minister make it clear that Government policy is that we can openly say—and our constituents see how we are voting, not how we are privately lobbying—what guidance we wish to give to the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman says I made a number of assertions in my statement. I made a number of comments that were based on the discussions that we have had so far with people from across this House, and we will continue to have those discussions. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will do so; as I indicated earlier, there is a neutral motion that is amendable next week. However, the comments I made on the views of people across the House were based on the discussions that we have had. There are further discussions to be had.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I would like to start by thanking the Prime Minister for offering to waive the £65 fee for EU citizens. I have a significant number in south Cambridge in my constituency, in the scientific and research communities, who will be relieved. However, what they will not be relieved about, and neither will I, is the fact that almost a week has gone by
since the vote that was significantly lost in this place, yet we have no further information today about what the Government’s position is. Surely we cannot go on for yet another week—that is wasting another two weeks in total—without some direction. Many Members in this House today have suggested a customs union, a people’s vote or indicative votes, and the Prime Minister must commit to honouring one of those next week.

The Prime Minister: I set out in the statement the issues that had come up during the discussions we have had with Members across this House. We will continue to have those discussions, and we are addressing the issues that I identified in my statement.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I cannot believe in good conscience, knowing what the Prime Minister does about the devastating impact of no deal on our economy and on our security, that she is willing to let us leave the EU on that basis, yet she seems wedded to her red lines and still against a people’s vote, which would have majority support if she backed it. With 67 days to go, the country deserves better than a massive game of chicken in the Tory party. When will the Prime Minister recognise she needs to move?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady talks about the issue of no deal. It is not good enough simply to say that somebody does not want no deal. You can only deliver not having no deal, as I have said, in two ways. There may be members of the Liberal Democrat party who have a different view from me on whether or not we should stay in the European Union—I believe we should honour the result of the referendum in 2016—but the only other way to ensure that we do not leave with no deal is to leave with a deal. It is pretty simple.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s recognition of the difficulties that have been raised about the backstop, so when she goes to Brussels, is she prepared to reopen the text of the withdrawal agreement in order to address many of the concerns that she has heard from many right hon. and hon. Members of the House with regard to the backstop?

The Prime Minister: What we are doing is talking to Members across the House to identify the various ways in which it would be possible to address the issue of the backstop. A number of options have been raised with us, and we are looking at all those options that have been raised.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister says that there are only two ways to rule out a no-deal scenario. Why does she keep leaving out the option of a people’s vote? It is true that that would involve seeking to extend article 50, but that would be for the very specific reason of the democratic consent of the British people rather than for no specific reason. On this issue, for both her and Labour party Front Benchers, is this not now a time for leadership and decision making, not prevarication and delay?

The Prime Minister: The decision was made in 2016 by the British people that we should leave the European Union. That is what we are delivering.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The Irish Government have warned of the likely adverse economic and social impact on the Republic of a no-deal Brexit given the extent of that country’s reliance on the British economy. Since the Irish backstop is probably the greatest impediment to a negotiated Brexit, will my right hon. Friend confirm that she maintains bilateral discussions with the Irish Government with a view to ascertaining, if at all possible, whether we can put forward an agreed position to the European Union?

The Prime Minister: We continue to talk to the Irish Government about their position in relation to the backstop. The formal position, of course, is that the issue of customs across the border—dealing with the border—is an EU competence and therefore not an individual member state competence. But of course the position that the Irish Government take will be an important element of any consideration that the EU gives to any proposals that we put forward. We will continue to talk to them.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that she wants to find a way forward but without allowing Parliament to vote on the different options, it is unclear how we can discover where consensus lies. Is it not the truth that any alternative to the Prime Minister’s deal—whether a Norway-type model, a Canada-type model, a customs union or a people’s vote—requires more time to negotiate or to go back to the country?

The Prime Minister says that extending article 50 is just putting off the decision, but the truth is that, by failing to build a consensus, the only way we can leave without a deal—now that her deal has been so roundly rejected by the House—is to extend article 50. Even at this late stage, will the Prime Minister now agree to do that?

The Prime Minister: We are continuing to work to see what deal would secure the support of the House such that we can leave the European Union with a deal. I also say to the hon. Lady that extending article 50 is not the great hope that she has—that somehow it solves everything. It defers the point at which the decision needs to be taken. There are limitations to what will be possible. This is not a decision for the United Kingdom alone and the EU would be highly unlikely to agree an extension to article 50 unless it had the prospect that an agreement, a deal, would be delivered. Talks to ensure that we can identify what deal can be delivered is what we are engaging in.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s comments on Northern Ireland. She knows that if we were to follow the route proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) and did get to the point where we could trigger article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade, we could continue for up to 10 years on zero tariffs and zero quotas. That would allay many of the fears of Opposition Members who are worried about high tariffs under so-called World Trade Organisation terms.

The Prime Minister: The question of GATT 24 is perhaps not quite as simple as some may have understood it to be. My right hon. Friend’s expectation that it is simply possible to leave with no deal and immediately
[The Prime Minister] go into that situation does not actually reflect accurately the situation that the United Kingdom would find ourselves in. I continue to believe that leaving with a deal is the best way forward for us in leaving the European Union, and that is what we will continue to work for.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Prime Minister aware that this is supposed to be blue Monday, the most miserable day of the year in the United Kingdom? But, on this day, may I offer her warmth and cheer? After last week’s resounding vote, she has showed her resilience and has been listening and talking to people. I urge her to carry that process on. In this Westminster village, things do not happen overnight, so will she persist? Otherwise, she will have missed the feeling of the House. We will be demanding a vote on the customs union; we will be demanding a vote on lengthening the process; and we will be demanding a vote on the people’s vote. If she listens more, we can come to a conclusion in the House that will be good for the country and not a miserable one.

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we want to continue those discussions and conversations, and to continue to listen, to find what he indicated at the end of his question: a way forward that can be supported by the House and that will be good for everybody across the country.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I am sorry, but this just is not good enough. This whole process is now turning our country into a laughing stock. The people of this country are worried and businesses have none of the certainty that they absolutely need in order to flourish. When the Prime Minister faced the possibility in December of losing the vote, she delayed it and said she would go over to the EU and sort out the backstop. We waited and nothing happened—nothing changed. Last week was a historic defeat. The House has spoken. It has rejected overwhelmingly the Prime Minister’s deal, and here we are with another week of can-kicking. Is not the truth, Prime Minister, that nothing has changed?

The Prime Minister: We received further assurances from the European Union following the delay of the vote in December. Those assurances proved not to be sufficient for the House—the House rejected the deal, including those assurances. We are now working with people across the House to find the way forward that will secure a deal so that we can leave the European Union in a smooth and orderly way—a deal that is in the interests of people across this country.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has rejected the demands of the leader of the Labour party to raise the white flag in the negotiations by moving the date of leaving the EU from 29 March. Is she disappointed that, even before she has put forward any plan B, the Irish Government and the Irish Vice-President of the European Parliament have rejected any suggestion that the backstop will be changed? Does she therefore accept that, in the face of such intransigence, we need to adhere to what the people of the United Kingdom have asked for and leave on 29 March?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we deliver on the vote that took place in the referendum in 2016. We will continue to talk to the Irish Government because I believe that the best way forward for all of us is to be able to leave with a deal. We recognise the commitments that we have made to the people of Northern Ireland for no hard border. I would hope we will be able to find a way through that can secure the support of the House and the European Union, such that we are able to leave with a good deal.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for her statement and for her willingness to engage with those who are willing to engage with her. I congratulate her on the vote last week that she won, namely the vote of confidence, which she won on the basis that she would engage in preparation for an orderly departure, and on the basis that we either negotiate a successful deal for which the House of Commons votes or leave on World Trade Organisation terms.

Will the Prime Minister take the advice of J.P. Morgan, which stood side by side with remain in the referendum, but which now warns that the extension of article 50 would be the worst of all possible worlds and “death by a thousand cuts” for the British economy? Will she ensure that we avoid that extension?

The Prime Minister: I had not seen that comment from J.P. Morgan, but I have been clear that it is important that we deliver on the referendum vote and leave the European Union on 29 March.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister said earlier that a public vote could damage social cohesion by undermining faith in our democracy. The public appetite for a second referendum is broken because of how she and her Government have thus far handled this process over the last years. Will she today acknowledge that there can be nothing more democratic than a vote that gives the entire country a final say on her deal?

The Prime Minister: Many, many people up and down this country have a very simple view: a vote took place in 2016 and the result of that was to leave the European Union. Many people now—not only those who voted to leave at the time but many who voted to remain—feel it is incumbent on Government and Parliament to deliver on the result of that vote.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Reports from Warsaw suggest that the Polish Foreign Secretary, Mr Czaputowicz, is taking the lead in trying to help the United Kingdom to break the impasse, by suggesting a definitive time for the backstop. Will the Prime Minister share with us some of the helpful things that the Polish Government are doing to help us, and encourage others to follow suit?

The Prime Minister: I look forward to exploring in more detail the proposals of the Polish Foreign Minister on the particular issue of dealing with the backstop. We have always worked well with the Polish Government on these and other matters in the European Union’s Council, and we want to continue to have that very close relationship with Poland after we leave the European Union.
Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On the Union, may I suggest that seeking public consent for a Brexit that looks very different from the one sold to the public in 2016 would do far less damage than tearing Scotland and Northern Ireland out of the Union in a botched Brexit against their will? So may I ask the Prime Minister, is her first loyalty to her party or to the country?

The Prime Minister: Every decision that I have taken, I have taken because I believe that it is right in the national interest. I genuinely believe that we should, as a Government and as a Parliament, deliver on the result of the referendum in 2016. I think that is our duty—it is very simple.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Twelve days ago, the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) warned that, in her view, a no-deal Brexit could be used by those who want to agitate for a border poll, trying to force Northern Irish people to vote to leave the UK. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is a risk, and will she confirm that no deal is not her top priority or, indeed, the priority of the Government?

The Prime Minister: The position of the Government is very clear: we want to leave the European Union with a deal—we want to leave with a good deal. The deal that we negotiated has been rejected. That is why we are asking questions across the House, and talking and listening to people about what would secure the support of this House that will enable us to leave with a good deal on 29 March.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The Prime Minister ruled out a second referendum on the grounds that such an action would undermine social cohesion in this country. Does she not accept that that displays an incredibly jaundiced view of the character of the British people?

The Prime Minister: No, it does not. If the right hon. Gentleman looks at the decision that was taken in 2016, many people—17.4 million—voted for us to leave the European Union. It was the highest turnout in a poll for some considerable time. Many people voted for the first time for many years, if not for the first time at all, in that referendum. If we were to go back to them to say that we were not delivering on the result of that referendum, that would indeed damage people’s faith in politics—it would damage our democracy.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As today is blue Monday, the gloomiest day of the year, will the Prime Minister cheer up at least 17.4 million people, and probably many more, by confirming that beyond a shadow of doubt this country will have left the European Union by 30 March?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point—in one sense, it is a very simple point, but it is very important—which is that 80% of the votes cast at the general election last year were cast for parties that had in their manifestos a commitment to respect and deliver on the referendum result and ensure we leave the EU, and that is what the Government are doing.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The words “customs union” were not on the ballot paper in the EU referendum. Can the Prime Minister name a UK manufacturer who has said that the benefits of free trade agreements around the world, even if they were agreed quickly, would outweigh the costs of our leaving the European customs union?

The Prime Minister: The position that I believe will be of great benefit to manufacturers and our economy is our having a good trading relationship with the EU and the freedom to negotiate those trade deals around the rest of the world, and that is what we have been working for.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How is remaining in a customs union consistent with the decision of the British people to be no longer subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. I believe one reason people voted to leave the EU was that they wanted to leave the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, and that is what we want to deliver.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Prime Minister said that EU citizens in the UK will be able to stay and continue to access in-country benefits and services on roughly the same terms as now. Is she aware that my constituents and many of those of my hon. Friends have been finding it difficult to access universal credit on the basis that they have not been here long enough? Will she look into this, because it seems that EU citizens are already being denied their rights? It is a new hostile environment for EU nationals.

The Prime Minister: The scheme that the Home Office has set out is very clear about the rights that EU citizens would have, and the withdrawal agreement, which I think the hon. Lady voted against, also sets out clearly

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, the Prime Minister suffered a major defeat. Today, she has not come to the House with any answers. She claims she wants to have extensive discussions on a variety of issues both inside and outside this House, yet meaningful discussions need time, so why is she refusing to call for an extension of article 50?

The Prime Minister: There were two elements in my statement on the question of discussions: the discussions we are holding to find a deal that can secure the support of the House and the discussions we will be having in the next stage of negotiations not just within the House, but outside the House. It is important for us to work to find a deal that enables us to leave on 29 March.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that Members should be mindful that most of us were elected on manifestos that promised to honour the referendum result?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point—indeed, it is a very simple point, but it is very important—which is that 80% of the votes cast at the general election last year were cast for parties that had in their manifestos a commitment to respect and deliver on the referendum result and ensure we leave the EU, and that is what the Government are doing.
the rights of EU citizens upon our leaving the EU, but I will ensure that the relevant Department looks at the issue she raises.

**Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for saying that she will go back to the EU to discuss the backstop in particular. When she goes, will she take with her a copy of the House of Lords report from March 2017 that says if we leave without a deal we do not owe it any money, because that may make it more willing to talk?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General responded to the issue of the House of Lords report in last week’s debate. He was very clear that the House of Lords report had looked at a particular aspect of law but had itself recognised there might be obligations under other aspects of international law. The advice is clear that there would be obligations on us to pay in a no-deal situation, and I believe that we should be a country that respects its legal obligations.

**Chuka Umunna** (Streatham) (Lab): I listened carefully to what the Prime Minister said about social cohesion and division in our country. We all worry about the far right and the threat it poses to our country, and history shows that a resurgence of the far right usually follows an economic depression, which is why avoiding no deal at all costs is essential. Does she not agree in any event that it would be wholly wrong to allow any group in society to threaten and intimidate us into not following our democratic processes and into not having votes, that this would clearly be unacceptable and that anyone engaging in such threats, violence and intimidation should feel the strong arm of the law come down on them?

**The Prime Minister:** There is an important issue relating to some of the behaviour that we have seen. Members of this House have been victims of it, but others also have been on the receiving end of aggressive behaviour because they appear to hold a different view from those held by other people. It is important that we are able to have our debates on these issues—not just in the House, but in public—with dignity and respect. Yes, people will want to put their positions passionately, and to hold that view equally passionately. However, I also believe it is important, when the House has given a decision to the British people in a referendum, that we deliver on that.

**Mr John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for listening to concerns expressed by a number of Conservative Members and for her recognition that there must be changes in the backstop, but will she also confirm that the aspects of our future relationship within that text which have not identified absolutely a particular position. In response to an earlier question, I referred to the balance between checks at borders and regulatory alignment. That is obviously a matter for the future negotiations.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has set out today, and on many occasions in recent weeks, her implacable opposition to any kind of public vote to establish public consent to the terms on which we leave the European Union through a referendum. Is she as implacably opposed to a general election?

**The Prime Minister:** If the right hon. Gentleman had heard the speech that I made last week in the no-confidence debate, he would know that I made it absolutely clear that I do not believe that a general election is in the national interest at this time.

**Greg Hands** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): May I return to issues concerning the World Trade Organisation? One of the things that will need to be sorted out in connection with the question of a no-deal Brexit is what will happen in relation to some of the “most favoured nation” clauses. If the Prime Minister were to put up no tariffs, barriers or checks to EU goods at all after 29 March—which would be very helpful in ensuring that there was no change in free-flowing trade from our side—that might provoke MFN challenges at the WTO.

What assessment have the Government made of the relative merit of carrying on with trade as it currently is in such a scenario, vis-à-vis the risk of WTO challenges? Those challenges would of course not be heard for 18 months, and any infraction could not be retrospective. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it may well be worth while—as long as the study is done—to pursue that course of simply keeping the border open in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

**The Prime Minister:** I know—given his previous ministerial position and his interests—that my right hon. Friend has considered this issue with great care. However, it is not simply a question of the tariffs that we set for items going across our border. Questions of the WTO requirements in relation to customs declarations at the border, and other issues which are referred to in the political declaration, such as issues relating to data, are also relevant to this matter.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): If the House votes to take time to consider options other than those that the Prime Minister has been presenting to us, will she accept that that is not an attack, but a sign of the strength of our parliamentary democracy?

**The Prime Minister:** If the hon. Lady is referring to the issue of an extension of article 50—

Helen Goodman indicated dissent.

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady shakes her head.

**Helen Goodman:** I am referring to Standing Order No. 14.
The Prime Minister: But the only way in which it is possible to ensure there is more time in the negotiations with the EU to find that resolution would be if article 50 were extended. Article 50, as I have indicated, cannot be extended simply by the decision of this House alone; it is a matter that has to be agreed by the European Union as well. It is very clear that it would not be likely to allow that extension unless it was clear that there was a deal or agreement that was coming forward as a result of that. As I have said, I believe we should be leaving the EU on 29 March, and the discussions I and others have been holding with Members across this House are aimed exactly at being able to do that with a deal that secures the support of this House.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and the extraordinary work she is doing to shape our exit from the EU. May I just say, in response to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who questioned the Prime Minister’s commitment to our country, that nobody on this side of the House, and very few people outside, would do that?

Can I press my right hon. Friend? If the leader of the Labour party continues to refuse to work collaboratively with the Government, that action effectively makes no deal the more likely outcome in March. Should he not just come clean and admit that?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said, the only way in which it is possible—or other than staying in the EU, which we will not do—to ensure that no deal is off the table is to agree a deal. I gave an offer—it remains open to the Leader of the Opposition—to engage in talks with us. They were precisely talks about ensuring we can have a deal so we do not leave with no deal.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): You could be forgiven for watching these proceedings and thinking that the Northern Irish backstop is the only issue that is preventing people from supporting this agreement, but last week when I visited the Glasgow Kelvin College campus in Easterhouse people expressed major concern about the Erasmus scheme and the lack of clarity for them. Not referring to universities, what reassurance can the right hon. Lady give to colleges in this country about the future after Brexit?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the political declaration, he will see that we have referenced those aspects of working—continuing to be able to work collaboratively with colleges and universities across the European Union through initiatives like Horizon and looking at the possibility of extending Erasmus. Those are referenced in the political declaration, but they cannot be part of a legally agreed text until after we have left the EU.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement reassuring over 3 million European nationals in the UK about having their fees for registration rights waived. Although the European Commission’s line on not being able to determine member states’ views on this is well known, the European Parliament’s Brexit co-ordinator put it to her that, because she wants to know the majority in this place, why does she not test it? May I put it to her that she is hardly Mystic Meg when it comes to understanding the will of this place, it would be a good thing for her to do? Also, there is only a very small minority—an ultra-small minority of very, very right-wing people—who are trying to undermine social cohesion in this country in order to prevent a people’s vote. When did the Tory party start running away from fascists rather than standing up to them?

The Prime Minister: I have to say that I think that comment was beneath the hon. Gentleman. Let me explain again why I say what I do about a second referendum. It is very simple. Throughout my political career I have seen other countries hold second referendums on decisions relating to Europe because the first one did not come out in the way the politicians of the time wanted when it was hugely important that people accepted the result of the first one. This House overwhelmingly voted for our referendum and overwhelmingly voted to trigger article 50, and I believe that we should follow through on those decisions and deliver on the vote that people took in the referendum in 2016.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I suggest that those remainers trying to hijack Government business and the Brexit process believe that people did not know what they were voting for when they voted to leave the EU, but they now seem to be suggesting that MPs did not know what they were doing when they voted to trigger article 50, given that the WTO was always the backstop. Parliament cannot become the Executive and the referendum result must be respected by Parliament. Will the Prime Minister therefore confirm, for the sake of absolute clarity on the Benches opposite, not only that we will be leaving on 29 March—she has made that very clear—but that, if the negotiations fail, we will be leaving on WTO terms: terms on which we profitably trade with the rest of the world?

The Prime Minister: We will be leaving the European Union on 29 March. I believe we shall be leaving on 29 March with a good deal. We are working across the House to ensure that we can deliver in negotiation with
the European Union and that we can find a deal that actually secures the support of this House. I believe that leaving with a good deal is the best outcome for the UK.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Prime Minister knows that Scotland is different. Scotland overwhelmingly rejected this Tory Brexit and increasingly wants nothing to do with its impending disasters. Surely at some point she must accept that, among all the options we have to consider, Scotland must be asked whether it wants to be part of this ugly, self-defeating, isolated Brexit Britain, or whether it should determine its own relationship with the EU as an independent nation.

The Prime Minister: We talk about honouring referendums, and actually there was a referendum in Scotland in 2014 which determined that Scotland should remain in the United Kingdom. That should be honoured by all of us in this House.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): In her welcome statement, the Prime Minister said that “the Government will consult this House on their negotiating mandate, to ensure that Members have the chance to make their views known”.

When she brings the agreement and the political declaration, in whatever form, back to the House, will she consider including those words in the motion for approval?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly look at my hon. Friend’s suggestion. Obviously, when there is a deal that will secure the support of the House, there will be a technical issue about how that motion will need to be worded such that it is clear and meets the requirements of the legislation. I think he is looking for reassurance that the agreement to enable Parliament to have a voice in that negotiating mandate is not simply words from the Dispatch Box and that it is actually delivered on.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Another week gone, and still no plan B. There will be no plan B next week, and probably none the week after. The clock is ticking away. Last week, the Attorney General said: “If we do not legislate for that legal certainty, as a matter of law alone, thousands of contracts, transactions, administrative proceedings and judicial proceedings in the European Union and this country will be plunged into legal uncertainty.”—[Official Report, 15 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 1024.]

Even if the Prime Minister’s deal had been agreed last week, at the rate we are going she stands no chance of getting all of that legislated for and providing legal certainty by 29 March. Please, please, please, just own up: you are going to have to delay 29 March.

The Prime Minister: Obviously the Attorney General set out that position, and that legal certainty would be provided by the provisions in the withdrawal agreement that was negotiated with the European Union. The vast majority of the withdrawal agreement relates to those sorts of issues, and what I am working for now is to ensure we can get agreement on those aspects of the withdrawal agreement that people have raised concerns about, such that we can leave with a good deal and ensure that we give that legal certainty to all those businesses outside. In order to do that, however, it will be necessary at some point for this House to support a deal with the European Union.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): It has been reported that President Macron is going to use the threat of the Irish backstop to force the UK into giving French fishing vessels continued access to UK waters. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that we are leaving the common fisheries policy on 29 March? Will she also confirm that she will say, “Non, non, non” to President Macron?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm that we are leaving the CFP, that we will indeed become an independent coastal state and that we will be negotiating access to our waters. Of course, for President Macron to suggest that he could use the backstop as a means of requiring us to give access to French fishermen would be counterproductive, because French fishermen would not have any access to our waters under the backstop.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am sure my views on this matter are well known to the House, so I choose my words with care. A week ago, I asked the Prime Minister what, in the event of the UK leaving the EU, Government fund would replace the European structural funds that have been such a benefit to the highlands for many years. In her answer, she said “the shared prosperity fund”. Will the Prime Minister give me an assurance today that the shared prosperity fund will find its way to the needy highlands and islands and not be—how shall I put it?—creamed off for cherished projects in the south of Scotland or near Edinburgh or Glasgow?

The Prime Minister: I will leave the hon. Gentleman to debate the issue of which parts of Scotland require funding. I assure him that we tackle inequalities between communities. We want a focus on raising productivity, which is important across our country, and we will consult widely on the fund, including the details of how it will operate and its priorities, which will be announced following the spending review.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): All Conservative Members stood on a manifesto in 2017 that said on page 36 that “we continue to believe that no deal is better than a bad deal for the UK.”

Given that this House decided by 230 votes last week that the Government’s proposal was a bad deal, if the Prime Minister goes back to Brussels and the EU is not prepared to give a good deal, will she honour that Conservative manifesto commitment and leave on 29 March with a clean, global Brexit?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we stood on that manifesto, and I have repeatedly said at the Dispatch Box that no deal was better than a bad deal, but I also believe that it is better for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union with a good deal. I am working with others from across the House to see what will secure the support of this House such that we leave the European Union and that we leave with a deal.
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that there is no majority in this House for a second referendum. She may be right, but there is clearly a majority against leaving with no deal. Is she saying to the House that, rather than provide extra time in order to secure a deal that can pass through this House, she will crash us out with no deal on 29 March?

The Prime Minister: If the House does not want to leave with no deal, the House must come together and agree the deal that will secure the support of the House, and that is what we are working on.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition has told us that he would rule out no deal, but he has also said that he would rule in a second referendum. It seems that his support for unilateral disarmament is rather similar to his approach to Brexit negotiations. I thank my right hon. Friend for, by contrast, sticking to her guns.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing that out. It is very important that the Government deliver for people and that we continue to deliver. It is interesting that, although the shadow Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), has referred to the Labour party’s position on a second referendum, I do not think the Leader of the Opposition has identified what he believes in relation to a second referendum.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Prime Minister said earlier that extending article 50 would just be deferring the moment of decision, but does she not agree that in the current situation, when there is no consensus in the House, it is very difficult to know what the will of the people is now, two and a half years down the road and amid this chaos, lack of leadership and indecision? Perhaps deferring the moment of decision is exactly what we need, so she should consider extending article 50.

The Prime Minister: The people made clear their will that we should leave the European Union. It is this House that now needs to identify how we can leave the European Union with a deal that will benefit people across the United Kingdom.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): My constituents in Dover and Deal who voted leave and remain alike have been in contact to express their concern that Members of this House may be engaged in unconstitutional games and parliamentary tricks to delay Brexit or stop it altogether. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, whatever happens, we will leave the European Union on 29 March and that she will always align with the people against anyone in this House to ensure that the people’s will and the referendum vote are carried through?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree that we should be delivering on leaving the European Union, and we have been clear that that will be on 29 March. Those who wish to use parliamentary procedure to try to reverse the vote of the British people need to think very carefully about what they are trying to do, because there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that this Parliament voted for that referendum and voted to trigger article 50, and that therefore this Parliament should deliver on those votes.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): With the clock ticking, and for us all to come together to agree a deal that delivers on the promises made in the 2016 referendum campaign and that rules out the disaster of no deal, why exactly will not the Prime Minister hold indicative votes in this House to establish actually what is the will of the House?

The Prime Minister: Once again, the position is set out very clearly in legislation. The Government will bring a neutral motion to this House, and that motion will be amendable. We are working to see what deal will secure the support of the House. Of course, it has to be a deal that we can negotiate with the European Union, because a deal, by definition, has to be agreed by both sides. I believe that the right thing for this Government to do is to listen to Members across the House and to work to find a deal that will secure support.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that enforcing a second referendum would be the most arrogant thing that this Parliament could ever do? It would be totally wrong to say to the people effectively, “You got it wrong last time. Now go away and have another try.” That referendum result was not some kind of “take note” memo; it was an instruction to this House. The instruction is just as valid today as it was the day after the referendum.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This House did not say to the British people, “Have this vote and we might think about whether we agree with it and will deliver on it.” We said, “It is your decision.” The Government campaigned for remain, but the Government leaflet was clear that the result would be respected, and that is exactly what this Parliament should do.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that she wants to reach out to civil society and trade unions. May I gently suggest to her that, over the next week, she reaches out to the Musicians Union—I declare my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—to find out what it thinks a future after Brexit should look like for touring musicians? I also suggest that she listens to remainers in general and tries to do her best to take into account what they think so that she can try to heal this very divided country.

The Prime Minister: That is precisely why I believe that it is important that we have a deal that will secure the support of this House—a deal that will respect the referendum, but in a way that protects people’s jobs, gives them certainty and protects our Union.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Is it not the case that four fifths of Members voted to trigger article 50, and that in doing so, they consciously—or perhaps semi-consciously in some cases—accepted that no deal would be the default option if we did not leave with a deal? If hon. Members have now changed their mind, should they not be open about that and say that they now want a second referendum or to ditch Brexit altogether? If they do not want that, and they do want an orderly Brexit and to prevent no deal, is not the only course open to them to agree a deal?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend sets out the position with impeccable logic. It is indeed correct that four fifths of this House voted to trigger article 50—for
[The Prime Minister]  

a two-year process that ends on 29 March this year. If people want us to leave with a deal, they have to agree a deal.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): This Government have brought us austerity, the benefit freeze, the two-child policy and the rape clause, all the while cutting tax for the richest in our society, yet the Prime Minister has the temerity to claim that it is a fundamental act of democracy—a second referendum—that will undermine social cohesion in the UK. What evidence does she have for that assertion?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman says this Government brought austerity. This Government had to respond to the significant financial and economic crisis left to us by the Labour Government when we took over in 2010. It is this Government who are bringing an end to austerity, and ensuring that our debt will come down and that we maintain lower taxes. I notice that the Scottish Government have been increasing taxes on people in Scotland. They might want to think very carefully about that before talking about impacts on people.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, particularly her reference to the backstop. I believe that if the EU was prepared to be somewhat more flexible on that, it could open the door to an acceptable agreement. In recent days, I have been contacted by constituents who are concerned that further opening of the negotiations could weaken our position on freedom of movement. My right hon. Friend has always been very firm on that issue. May I invite her to reaffirm her determination to ensure that there is no relaxation of the current position?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. I have always said that I believe that the desire to bring an end to free movement was one of the things that led to many people voting to leave the European Union. This Government will deliver on that—there will be an end to free movement.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): In a radio interview yesterday, the Solicitor General said that he thought that agreement on a customs union would provide a way to unify this House. What is the Prime Minister’s response to her Solicitor General?

The Prime Minister: My response is that the discussions we have been having across the House suggest that opinions on this matter and on what to drive forward are more varied than a simple solution such as the one that the hon. Gentleman suggests.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am sure that hon. Members across the House welcome my right hon. Friend’s commitment to maintaining workers’ rights and environmental standards. Does she agree that we can be more ambitious and lead the way on that, but only if we leave the EU with a deal?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I believe that we can lead the way around the world on these issues, but to do that, we have to leave the European Union with a good deal and then have the freedom to set very high standards.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement and for her endeavours. A poll in Northern Ireland just last week shows that 70% of Unionists are against another vote on leaving the EU. Some 71% of Unionists want Brexit and 66% are against the withdrawal agreement, which was so heavily defeated in this House just last week. Will the Prime Minister confirm that she will not ignore the opinion of Unionists, that the backstop will have to be removed, and that Northern Ireland will continue to be an integral part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, on the same basis as England, Wales and Scotland?

The Prime Minister: Obviously it is my position and the Government’s position that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and we want Northern Ireland to continue to be able to be that integral part of the United Kingdom. It is right that we deliver on the vote to leave the European Union. The backstop has been identified as a key issue and we will continue to work with the hon. Gentleman and his right hon. and hon. Friends, and with others across this House who have raised this issue, to find a way through that enables us to secure a deal.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her determination to leave the EU on 29 March. Does she agree that this has become a matter of trust between the people and politicians, and that if we fail to deliver and leave on that date, that trust will be damaged irreparably?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that these decisions are about matters of trust, which is why I have been concerned about the proposals for a second referendum. I think that a second referendum would damage that trust between the people and politicians.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Brexit is a fantasy based on lies. Nothing about Brexit will make our constituents’ lives any better. When will the Prime Minister start standing up for what is right and stop running down the clock? When will she rule out no deal and put this decision back to the people?

The Prime Minister: I say very gently to the hon. Lady that I believe she stood in the general election on a manifesto that committed to deliver Brexit, and that is what we are doing.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement about the waiving of visa fees, but will she assure us that the Home Office will not seek to recoup the cost by jacking up visa and asylum costs elsewhere? In response to some of the points made by Opposition Members, does she agree that it is just not compatible for any Member or party that undertook to respect the referendum result in their 2017 manifesto now to claim that they support a second vote that includes the option completely to disrespect the first one by overturning it?
The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. First, we will ensure that, as I have said, those fees will be waived, and those who have already applied or are applying during the pilot will have their fees reimbursed. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the point in relation to a second referendum. It is so important that we show people that they can have trust in their politicians by delivering on the decision that they took in 2016.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I do not doubt that the Prime Minister has tried her level best to secure an acceptable agreement, but she has clearly failed—the scale of her defeat last week was monumental—largely because she has been constrained by the national economic interest. Following that failure, surely it would now be right to offer the people a vote.

The Prime Minister: We agreed to give the people a vote and that vote took place in 2016. The people voted to leave the European Union, and this Parliament should accept, as the Government are doing, the importance of delivering on the vote that people gave in the 2016 referendum.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): When the withdrawal agreement was made with the EU, President Macron almost immediately made a statement contrary to the text of the agreement, saying that unless the UK agreed to allow EU fishing vessels to have the same access to our waters as they have now, talks on a wider trade deal would fail, leaving the UK in the backstop. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that was an empty threat, that when she goes back to the EU she will stand firm on her commitment that we will leave the common fisheries policy, and that future access to our fishing waters will not be tied to a deal on trade?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. In fact, it is clear in the political declaration that the issue of access to fishing waters is separate from the issue of market access for trade. I am also clear that we will ensure that we leave the common fisheries policy and become an independent coastal state, and that we will be negotiating access to our waters in the future.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Before Christmas, the Prime Minister assured me in the House that there were adequate civil servants in each Government Department dealing with Brexit, so will she explain why, according to a written parliamentary answer, the Department of Health and Social Care has 385 fewer civil servants than it had on 23 June 2016? What does that mean for future medical supplies in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: The two points that the hon. Gentleman raises are not linked. On medical supplies, the Department of Health and Social Care has been working with pharmaceutical companies and others to ensure that arrangements are in place so that medical supplies will be available in the event that we leave with no deal. The Government’s position is that we want to leave with a deal. We are working on finding a deal that will secure the support of this House.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Forgive my voice, Mr Speaker. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if we have to leave with no deal, we are likely to find a far more conciliatory EU after we have left than we are finding now while we are in it?

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to learn of the hon. Gentleman’s indisposition, but I hope that he will take it in the right spirit if I say that there is a husky intelligibility about him.

The Prime Minister: I am not sure whether it is appropriate for me to comment on my hon. Friend’s husky intelligibility at this point, Mr Speaker.

May I say to my hon. Friend that it is important for this country to continue to have good relations with the European Union once we have left? Working to leave with a deal that is agreed by both sides will help in that regard. People have focused on the backstop in the withdrawal agreement and often on the trade aspects, but the security aspects—the arrangements with the European Union to enable us to continue to work together on matters such as dealing with terrorism and organised crime—will be important in the future.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Time marches mercilessly on towards 29 March. Given the current trajectory, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that we will end up in a situation on 28 March when the Prime Minister will have failed to agree a deal, but also failed to negotiate an extension to article 50. She will then be faced with two options: to see the United Kingdom crash out with no deal; or to revoke article 50. Only one of those in that situation would be in the national interest, so which choice will she take?

The Prime Minister: I am working to ensure that we can agree a deal with the European Union that will secure the support of this House such that we leave on 29 March, but do so with a deal.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that the first rule of politics is to turn up?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that there are those across this House who will take that message to heart and act on it.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Let us not forget that the fact that the Prime Minister is here at all before us today to explain her plan B, which looks suspiciously like plan A, and the fact that we had a meaningful vote at all are only because she was compelled to do so by Back-Bench action, not because of her own good will. I feel that good will, as well as time, is now slipping away. May I suggest to her that to prevent the old “strong and stable” becoming “scared of scrutiny”, and to win back good will from Members on both sides of the House, including many of her own Ministers, she should just rule out no deal now? Where there is a will, there is a way.

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady cared to look at the record in Hansard, she would see that far from being compelled to come to this House to give statements on the matter of Brexit, I have regularly come to this
House to give statements on Brexit. I think the calculation was that, certainly between October and Christmas, the time was 24 hours. I have given more hours since to this House during debates and statements. I have not been reluctant to come to this House to answer questions from Members on the issue of Brexit.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Last Friday, 50 of my Redditch constituents joined me here in Parliament on the bus tour and we held our own series of indicative votes. Out of all the options, the one that was overwhelmingly preferred was to leave the EU with the Prime Minister’s deal. When I asked whether anyone had changed their mind from leave to remain or remain to leave, not a single hand went up. Does the Prime Minister not think it is amazing that there are Opposition Members who think that they know more about what is in my constituents’ minds than my constituents themselves?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a very assiduous constituency Member of Parliament. I note that she takes every effort to make sure that she knows the minds of her constituents, and she is very clear from that that we should be leaving and that we should be leaving with a deal.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Why does the Prime Minister continue to claim that the only way to rule out no deal is either to vote for her deal or to revoke article 50? She knows that that is not the case. A third way is to put her deal to the people in a people’s vote and let them choose between her deal and staying in the European Union. Why will she not admit that?

The Prime Minister: From discussions around the House, it is very clear that when people talk about a second referendum, there are those who talk about putting forward a question on the deal negotiated with the European Union—we still have work to do, as I said earlier, with people who put “remain” on the ballot paper—and there are those who say that the question should be about deal or no deal; that would not rule out no deal. Then there are those who say that a combination of all three of those options should be put to the British people. We put a very clear option to the British people in 2016; they voted, and we should deliver on it.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The Prime Minister and others have talked about manifesto commitments this afternoon. Our Conservative manifesto said:

“As we leave the European Union, we will no longer be members of the…customs union”.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that is still her intention?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely stand by the manifesto commitments that we gave. I believe that it is important that we continue to have a good trading relationship with the European Union. I think there are many ways in which we can do that with appropriate customs arrangements.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): From her remarks this afternoon, it seems clear that the Prime Minister wants this House to vote for a way forward that is acceptable to her personally, not just to a majority in Parliament. Let me give her a further opportunity to give a straight answer to a very simple question. If there is a majority in the House for a particular way forward next week, will she honour that vote, and instruct her Government to do so? Why has she been unable so far this afternoon to be straight with people, and to give a straight answer to that very simple question?

The Prime Minister: I believe that the Government and this Parliament have a very clear instruction: we should ensure that we leave the European Union. That is something that we have a duty to deliver. That is what I am working on, and on making sure that we can do that with a deal that has the support of the House.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I wonder if the Prime Minister has seen the Federation of Small Businesses’ survey of its members, published today. It shows that business confidence is falling, and that there are concerns that

“The danger of a serious economic shock posed by a chaotic no-deal Brexit is real and imminent.”

The Prime Minister has shown that she understands the need to provide certainty to business, so what assurances can she give us that there will be a deal in place by 31 March?

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome the Prime Minister’s decision to waive fees for EU nationals, but once again, she is four months behind the Scottish Government. It is clear—I see it again today—that her pig-headed stubbornness and ridiculous red lines have brought us to this position; it is a mess of her making. Why was she not willing to have cross-party talks two and a half years ago?

The Prime Minister: I have said previously that we have been listening to the comments made and the views given. We have listened to the views of the Scottish Government and we are listening to the views of the Welsh Government. The House has rejected the deal that we put before it; we will now work to find a deal that can secure the support of the House.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that everyone in this House who values our precious Union should remember that the Scottish nationalists will seek to take full advantage of any failure of this House to deliver an orderly Brexit to break up our United Kingdom, and that we should all redouble our efforts to find a way forward that protects and strengthens the United Kingdom?
The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. What we again see, and have seen in this House in recent weeks, is Scottish nationalists having only one interest: trying to break up our United Kingdom. Our United Kingdom is indeed precious, and membership of our United Kingdom is in the economic interests of the constituents of all the SNP Members of this House.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister is still refusing to countenance any form of new customs union. Putting aside her interpretation of the referendum result on that point, because that is contested, could she give us any examples of specific products that she feels British consumers are currently paying too much for as a result of the common commercial policy—bearing in mind that things like clothing from Bangladesh are incredibly cheap in British shops—because the benefits of leaving a customs union are unclear, but the costs are evidently extremely high?

The Prime Minister: The benefit of not being part of the common commercial policy within the customs union of the European Union is that it will enable us to negotiate trade deals on our own behalf around the rest of the world. We are working to ensure that the arrangements—agreements—that are already in place between the European Union and countries around the world will be transitioned to the United Kingdom when we leave the European Union, and then we will work to ensure those trade deals with many around the world.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for the change to the fees, which I think could be very welcome across the House? Does she agree that when we had the cross-party meeting of manufacturing MPs, it was clear that there were a significant number of Labour Members who wanted to see a deal? Does she agree that it is really for the Leader of the Opposition actually to try to represent his colleagues, and he should go to these meetings? I think it is time to talk across the aisle.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for pointing that out. It is indeed the case that there were many Labour Members at that meeting who wanted to see us leaving with a deal. I have invited the Leader of the Opposition to come to talk to me about how we can find a deal that actually secures support across this House, and I think that in representing his Members he should be willing to talk.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Despite last week’s historic defeat, the Prime Minister still seems hell-bent on indulging in an ill-conceived and potentially catastrophic game of Russian roulette with the lives of millions of people. Given the impasse that we are in, and with time running out, why is she so fearful of having meaningful talks, without preconditions, with others in this place—talks that can include ruling out no deal, extending article 50, and with time running out, why is she so fearful of a deal that actually secures support across the House, and I think that in representing his Members he should be willing to talk.

The Prime Minister: I declare an interest as one of them. What I have not heard her say today, or on other occasions, is how she thinks we can reset the relationship between Westminster and the rest of the country. How does she think that we can do this, and what is she going to do to ensure that people right around our country feel that they can take control of their lives and their own futures?

The Prime Minister: We have already been exploring in various ways how we can involve the elected city and regional Mayors in discussions that take place about a number of matters relating to the United Kingdom. When it comes to the shared prosperity fund, the hon. Gentleman will be able to input into that consultation any views that he might have about how we can ensure that the views of all parts of the United Kingdom are reflected in that.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Having been the trade rapporteur for the Council of Europe to the WTO, can I gently say to the Prime Minister that in the event of a no-deal Brexit we would end up with our rules being made by a Council of Ministers where we would have less say, administered by a Commission where we would have fewer appointees, and enforced by a panel of judges that would not be democratically elected and would overrule British courts? Is this not a betrayal of the people who voted leave, because no deal would not only invoke a hard border in Northern Ireland but mean losing control? Leavers in Swansea are saying to me that they want a vote on a deal to find out whether the promises being made are delivering on their reasonable expectations—because, frankly, they are not.

The Prime Minister: The expectations of ensuring that we have a smooth and orderly Brexit and deliver the opportunities of Brexit are best delivered by having a deal. The work we are doing currently is to see what deal will secure the support of the House, but it will be for Members of the House once again to think about what they say to their constituents if they fail to support a deal that enables us to leave in that smooth and orderly way.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Given that the Prime Minister is engaged in protracted discussions with the EU and Members of this House on the backstop, which seem to have been going on for as long as I can remember and are likely to go on for some time, it seems likely that an extension of article 50 will be required. Will she raise that with the EU? By which date does she believe that Parliament would have to agree on a deal for that extension not to be required?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady’s question makes certain assumptions about what will happen. I am working to ensure that we get a deal across the House. I hope
that all parties will be prepared to enter those talks and to work with us to ensure we have a deal that secures the support of the House.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the decision to waive the fee for the EU settlement scheme, even if it should never have been implemented in the first place. I have spoken to several EU citizens who are completely unaware of the scheme, and problems with it are already being reported. Does the Prime Minister agree with EU citizens’ groups who say that the Government’s communication about the scheme is inadequate and that vulnerable people who are unable to prove their right to be in this country could face problems?

The Prime Minister: We have been working very closely with groups such as the 3million to ensure that we get the message out about the scheme for EU citizens who currently live here and about their rights. Of course, those rights were enshrined in the withdrawal agreement that was rejected by the House last week. We will continue to work to communicate to people what the scheme is and the requirements, in terms of people being able to show their status and get settled status, and to make sure that people know the decision that has been taken in relation to the fee.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Both Dundee University and Abertay University in my city have been horrified to learn today that a no-deal scenario is still on the table. Indeed, university leaders have united to tell the Prime Minister that a no-deal Brexit could lead to “an academic, cultural and scientific setback from which it would take decades to recover’. Which part of that does the Prime Minister not understand?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman is concerned about the universities in his constituency and the potential impact of no deal, he needs to ensure that we leave the European Union with a deal. We are working to ensure we get a deal that can be supported across the House. I assume from what he says that when a deal comes back to the House, he will support it.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that she is listening, but I have seen no evidence that she is hearing what people are saying. I want to push her on this point. She has shared an article today about the universities in his constituency and the potential impact of no deal. She has also said that she is listening, but I want to understand what she means by listening, because listening is not just about reading the headlines.

The Prime Minister: Of course, which of the amendments tabled to the motion were subject to a debate and a potential vote of the House would be a matter for Mr Speaker; which amendments are chosen is his decision.

On the hon. Lady’s second question, as we negotiate the detail of our future relationship with the European Union across many areas that affect not just businesses but citizens, civil society, trade unions and those involved in security matters, we will see how we can work with people to enable their voice to be heard.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I welcome the Prime Minister’s renewed commitment to the Good Friday agreement. I look forward to seeing the results of the inquiry into which Cabinet member—because it can only be a Cabinet member—briefed the press exactly the opposite earlier today. Given that 70%—plus of the people of Northern Ireland voted for the Good Friday agreement, does the Prime Minister intend to have discussions with the political parties in Northern Ireland that represent that 70% majority, or does she intend to decide what is best for Northern Ireland based purely on the views of the only party in that country that wanted the Good Friday agreement to fail?

The Prime Minister: We speak regularly—both I and, indeed, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland regularly speak—with all the political parties in Northern Ireland.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): If the Prime Minister is so concerned about employment rights and if she is so concerned about environmental protection, why did it take two years and a defeat by 230 for them to be put on the agenda? If it is such a desperate afterthought, which it clearly is, why should we take seriously her protestations about being interested in them now?

The Prime Minister: The basis of the hon. Gentleman’s question is not correct. He asks about—he references—the commitment that we have in relation to workers’ rights. Look at what we have been doing to enhance workers’ rights: the Matthew Taylor report, because we recognise the importance of ensuring that the rights of workers in the new gig economy are properly protected. Look at what we have done on the environment in relation to plastics: the 25-year environment plan that we have published. We have been working on these issues. We recognise that Members of this House have raised concerns to ensure that greater assurance is given on those issues, and that is exactly what we are going to do.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Today marks the centenary of the first sitting of Dáil Éireann, established after an all-Ireland vote in the 1918 election. In 1998, the people of Ireland once again expressed their commitment to the Belfast agreement, does the Prime Minister intend to have discussions with the political parties in Northern Ireland about the only party in that country that voted for the Good Friday agreement? I look forward to seeing the results of the inquiry into which Cabinet member—because it can only be a Cabinet member—briefed the press exactly the opposite earlier today.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will perhaps want to reflect on the nature of the question that she has just asked me and on the way in which she has put that question. May I just say to her that this is not a renewed commitment to the Good Friday agreement, but a no-deal Brexit threatens this, so will the Prime Minister now assure the House that she respects the sovereignty of the Irish people, and will she take no deal off the table?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will perhaps want to reflect on the nature of the question that she has just asked me and on the way in which she has put that question. May I just say to her that this is not a renewed commitment to the Good Friday agreement? We have consistently committed to the Belfast agreement, and we remain committed.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Prime Minister will recall that the very first answer she gave at Prime Minister’s questions this year was in response to my question about the EU settlement scheme. I warmly welcome the decision to scrap the pay-to-stay element of that scheme, but may I now ask her to go a step further? Will she end the stress...
for our EU friends, neighbours and colleagues, save the UK taxpayer money, and scrap the scheme altogether—simply guarantee their rights?

The Prime Minister: We are guaranteeing their rights, but we want to ensure that those EU citizens are able, in future, to show that they have that settled status here in the United Kingdom. That is why the scheme is so important.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) rose—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh, what a delicious choice—two McDonalds. Of course, E comes before U, but on the other hand, C comes before M. I call Stuart C. McDonald.

Hon. Members: Hurrah!

Stuart C. McDonald: A very popular choice, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much.

Scrapping the settled status fee is indeed a welcome step, but if the Prime Minister is not going to follow the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), will she at least answer the question of why there are no appeal rights in the new immigration Bill for EU citizens who are refused settled status? Will she also answer: why do the Government continue to insist on an application cut-off date, inevitably meaning that the hundreds of thousands who miss that deadline will end up in a situation very close to that faced by the Windrush generation?

The Prime Minister: We have set a significant period of time for people to be able to apply under this scheme. I think that that is the right thing to do. May I just say that the hon. Gentleman may want to talk to his hon. Friends? I have just had a question from one of his

hon. Friends that basically encouraged me to scrap the settlement scheme as a whole. Now the hon. Gentleman is saying to me that the settlement scheme should be extended for even longer.

Mr Speaker: I call Stewart Malcolm McDonald.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: And don’t you forget it, Mr Speaker!

The Prime Minister is of course to be commended for waiving the fee, as many have asked her to do, but I want to question her on the phrase she used about an “enhanced” status for the devolved Governments. Will it include her—and I mean the Prime Minister—appearing before Committees of the Scottish Parliament? When we talk about the enhanced status for the Government as opposed to the Parliament, will she tell us what concessions the Scottish Government can look forward to, to prove that that is not just meaningless twaddle?

The Prime Minister: As I say, I will be meeting the First Minister of Scotland and the First Minister of Wales—I hope to meet both of them this week—when I will be able to talk to them further about the arrangements that we will have in the future for that enhanced role for the Scottish Government.

On a different topic, may I say to the hon. Gentleman that I understand there was some difficulty—that he was the subject of some difficulties—from a particular part of the political spectrum in this country on Friday, and I am sorry to hear that that took place? I understand that the police were able to deal with the issue, but no Member of this House should be subjected to that.

Mr Speaker: I echo entirely what the Prime Minister has just said on that matter. I think it will be something that commands universal assent across the House, and I thank her for what she has said.

Indeed, for that matter, I thank all 107 Back Benchers who questioned the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister for patiently responding.
Northern Ireland: Security Situation

5.55 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement to the House following the terrorist attack in Londonderry on Saturday evening.

As the people of the city and those visiting were making the most of the renowned hospitality on offer, a crude, unsophisticated but dangerous explosive device detonated as brave Police Service of Northern Ireland officers were clearing the area. CCTV released by the PSNI shows teenagers and others passing by only minutes before the device detonated. It is sobering to think that a truly sickening outcome by those responsible was only narrowly averted.

First, I would like to pay tribute to the police and other emergency services that responded so magnificently in the immediate aftermath of the attack. It was through their urgent actions that we are not facing circumstances in which there could have been casualties or even fatalities. A nearby hotel was busy, a fundraising event was taking place in a hall adjacent to where the device exploded and elderly residents in sheltered accommodation were all within yards of the explosion. Those who planned this attack and placed this crude device in a busy city centre have absolutely no regard for the people who live and work there.

Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that there are a number of security alerts ongoing in Derry/Londonderry today. We are being kept informed of developments by the PSNI, which is working hard, along with other agencies, to ensure that this sort of mindless disruption is minimised.

Let us be clear, however, that those behind the attack will never succeed. Londonderry is a city that has thrived since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement 20 years ago—everyone can see that—and one that will continue to grow and develop despite the actions of those who seek to sow discord and division. That is why the city has sent a clear message in the wake of this attack—that these people and these actions have no place in their city. Political leaders, the business sector and those offering hospitality to a growing number of visitors to Northern Ireland have all spoken out to challenge those who seek to continue with these violent and futile acts. The wider community in the city have also united their voices in condemnation, and we should all listen carefully to what they say.

To be clear, the city remains open for business. Londonderry chamber of commerce condemned the attack, but was clear that it would not “deter us from opening today and getting on with the job.”

The bottom line is that voices across the political, business and community spectrum are united. This is intolerable violence, which has absolutely no place in our society. We all want to look forward and build a peaceful future for Northern Ireland. The small number of people responsible for this attack have absolutely nothing to offer Northern Ireland and will not prevail.

Violent dissident republican terrorists operate in relatively small, disparate groupings. Their campaign of hatred and violence is, unfortunately, nothing new. Law enforcement pressure has reduced the number of national security attacks in Northern Ireland. In 2018, there was only one national security attack, compared with five in 2017, four in 2016 and a total of 16 attacks in 2015. Although there has been a reduction in the overall number of national security attacks in recent years, vigilance in the face of the continuing threat remains essential. The current Northern Ireland-related terrorism threat to Northern Ireland, or NIRT threat, is “severe”, which means that an attack is highly likely. This attack does not change that threat level.

Although there have been many successes by the police and others, it is clear that dissidents remain intent on killing. In attempting to impose their unwanted control on people across Northern Ireland, these groupings also choose to ignore democracy and consent principles that have been, and will continue to be, central to the political process. The Government have consistently made it clear that terrorism will not succeed and tackling it continues to be of the highest priority. We are determined to keep people safe and secure across the whole of our United Kingdom.

Derry is a vibrant city with a bustling economy and an exciting arts and cultural scene, as demonstrated in 2013 when it was the UK’s city of culture. Success breeds success. That is also why the Government have backed Londonderry and will continue to do so. Building on the £350 million commitment we have made towards a Belfast city deal, the UK Government are equally committed to delivering a comprehensive package of economic support for Derry and Strabane. A city deal for Derry and Strabane will boost investment and productivity, generate jobs and deliver growth and prosperity, and that activity has been supported by a number of visits by UK Government Ministers.

At the Budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer opened formal negotiations for a Derry and Strabane city region deal. Those negotiations are under way. It is crucial that this unique opportunity is grasped to unlock the economic transformation that the region needs and deserves. But it is not just the UK Government who are backing Derry/Londonderry. From all across the world, businesses recognise Londonderry for the great place that it is to do business. Whether it is financial services firms such as FinTrU or IT company Alchemy Technology Services, new jobs are being created every day in the city.

Finally, and in direct opposition to the kind of ideas and barbarism advocated by those responsible for Saturday’s attack, Londonderry continues to shine as a beacon of culture and progress on the island of Ireland, as a major tourist destination and as a host for world renowned events such as the Clipper round the world race. As Assistant Chief Constable Mark Hamilton said yesterday, it is not dissident republicans who hold the ground in Londonderry—it is the community. Anyone who has any information should pass it to the police or anonymously to Crimestoppers. I commend this statement to the House.
the Police Service of Northern Ireland officers who went forward at personal risk and successfully evacuated the area and hotel. They deserve our thanks. I join the Secretary of State in that message of congratulations.

It is right that the attack should have received universal condemnation across the different communities in Derry, from the Democratic Unionist party through to Sinn Féin. The House of Commons now has an opportunity to add its voice to that condemnation. As a city, Derry has seen enormous progress over the past 20 years. Some businesses will have been affected by Saturday’s attack. Will there be, where appropriate, the necessary support for them to get back up and running? We also know, of course, that some 40 families are out of their homes in the Creggan. Can we be assured that all due care is being taken to look after their welfare?

I now turn to the security situation, which has been severe in Northern Ireland over at least the last decade and more. I strongly welcome the 300 extra PSNI officers that the Secretary of State announced recently, but those were Brexit-related additions who will take time to train. The PSNI is still well below its Patten-recommended numbers. Will the Secretary of State talk to the Chancellor so that the PSNI numbers return to the levels necessary to confront the challenges of ordinary policing, as well as the type of situation that the service faced over the weekend?

This United Kingdom of ours faces many different challenges. My own home city of Manchester saw that not so long ago in the arena, and we know about the attacks that took place outside the House of Commons and other attacks. The security services are under some strain. The right hon. Lady will not want to comment directly on the security services, but may we have an assurance that there is an adequacy of security personnel, particularly as far as Northern Ireland is concerned?

We have to consider things that have a material impact when it comes to security. Symbols and words make a difference in Northern Ireland. I was grateful to hear the Prime Minister earlier rule out any changes to the Good Friday agreement; that is right and proper. However, we still hear talk from Members about the possibility of crashing out of the European Union—a hard Brexit, which will mean a hard border across the island of Ireland. That is irresponsible. I hope that the Secretary of State will join me in saying that that cannot be allowed to happen. We cannot give succour through the erection of a hard border to those who would do us harm.

Normal politics do not function at the moment in Northern Ireland. If the reconciliation process that began 20 years ago under the Good Friday agreement is to advance, we need a return to normal politics. If politics cannot offer change and the hope of change, frankly we give an easy gift to those who would do us all harm. We cannot allow that. I say to politicians from Northern Ireland in this House and beyond that it is now time for them to take responsibility and take the venom out of politics. It is time for them to take the risk of beginning to establish the institutions that we need to make democracy work. Take that risk and get the Stormont Assembly back up and running. People have to commit to that.

I gently say to the Secretary of State that she cannot put the return of Stormont into the “too hard to handle for now” box. There has to be some urgency in bringing Stormont back together. May I ask the right hon. Lady two specific things? First, will she commit now to resuming the five-party talks that could see a return to normalcy and to politics delivering change? That is fundamental in the light of what happened on Saturday. I also want to make her an offer, which she may want to take up. I will travel with her to Derry to meet local politicians in the local community to show that this House of Commons is absolutely unified in its condemnation of terror and its desire to say that there is a better way. Politics must offer that better way.

Karen Bradley: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his comments, including his thanks to the PSNI, and for his steadfastness with the universal condemnation of everyone in the House of the act on Saturday night and other activities. I will be visiting the north-west again soon, as I do regularly. I will check my diary and see whether we can do some sort of joint visit.

[Interruption.] It looks as if more than one shadow Front Bencher wants to come. The hon. Gentleman made a good point in saying that that would send a clear message across Northern Ireland about the commitment of this House to their safety, security and prosperity.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the security situation and the numbers of PSNI officers. I want to be clear with him that the Government have always protected and provided funding for counter-terrorism-related work in Northern Ireland—£230 million in the last Parliament and £160 million in this one. On top of that, cross-Government spending on counter-terrorism right across the UK will increase by 30% in real terms over this Parliament. With the Home Secretary sat next to me, I can also give the hon. Gentleman the comfort he needs that there is adequate funding, so that our security services and others can do their difficult work.

I want to repeat what the Prime Minister said in her statement. Despite press reports, there is absolutely no desire on the part of anybody in this Government to see anything other than the full upholding of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement—our commitment and those structures and institutions. I, too, want those structures and institutions to be back where they should be. I want politicians in Northern Ireland to be in that Parliament building on the hill in Stormont—busy, active, making decisions and doing the right thing by the people of Northern Ireland.

I want those talks to resume as soon as possible, not least because things such as the North South Ministerial Council are missing—it is not just the institutions. Those are important matters, as are the ones the Prime Minister spoke about in her statement on our future relationship with the European Union and the role of the devolved Administrations in that.

I want to make one final point to be clear that nobody should try to draw any connection between what happened on Saturday night and any of the discussions we are having in the House or with our friends in Europe. The attack on Saturday night is the result of a threat level that has been in place since before the Brexit vote. Those people have been working and trying to carry out these plots and activities for many years. We need to be clear that those activities are not welcome—the people of Northern Ireland do not want that kind of activity on their streets—and that they have absolutely nothing to with Brexit or anything close to it.
Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and for its measured and above all balanced tone. I also welcome the comments of the shadow Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State mentioned the PSNI. This could have been a hideous incident and it is very much thanks to the professionalism of the PSNI officers who spotted a suspicious car and then very professionally moved people away that there was no injury. She mentioned the significant funds that the coalition Government gave to the PSNI and the security forces—we thwarted a large number of incidents thanks to that. She provided a very welcome £16 million just before Christmas for another 300 officers but where is that money? Has it been given to the PSNI and when will it be transformed into real officers on the streets?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend has significant experience and knowledge of Northern Ireland. He is right to give credit to the PSNI. I have spoken to the Chief Constable a couple of times over the last three days—inevitably—and I too have paid tribute to those individual officers who turned up for what they believed would be a normal Saturday evening shift to find themselves confronted by that incident. Their bravery and actions are why this was not a far worse incident.

It would be better if I write to my right hon. Friend so that I can give him absolutely clarity on exactly where the PSNI funding is and how long it will take to recruit those 300 police officers.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement.

The utterly shameful and cowardly attacks carried out in Derry on Saturday evening, along with the ongoing incidents in the city, are a reminder, if any were needed, that many of the terrorists have not gone away. For the avoidance of doubt, SNP Members utterly condemn these pointless and shameful attacks and welcome the five arrests that have been made thus far. On behalf of the SNP, I extend our thanks and praise for the rapid response of the PSNI and the emergency services to these incidents. Our thoughts are with all those affected, including the delivery driver whose van was hijacked after a gun was held to his head.

Lords amendments to the Counter-terrorism and Border Security Bill will be debated tomorrow in the House, which I look forward to, but other interventions in the House from many on the Conservative Benches, who make spurious and uninformed assertions on the backstop, the border and the Good Friday agreement, risk making an already fragile situation more dangerous if they get their way. I fully accept that Saturday evening itself had little to do with the current situation, as the Secretary of State said. However, as it is, it is clear that the current vacuum at Stormont is not conducive to a stabilised political situation. The European Research Group approach should not be given any consideration whatsoever.

In response to the shadow Secretary of State, the Secretary of State said that she wanted to restore the institutions that were formed to uphold the Good Friday agreement, but will she outline what steps the Government are taking to do so and what is being done to prevent groups such as the new IRA from taking a foothold?

The frontline of counter-terrorism is community police, community groups and others. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to strengthen frontline resources and services? If positive action is taken on the last two steps, she will certainly have SNP support.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. It is for future activities but I appreciate it.

I have visited the Strand Road police station in Londonderry on a couple of occasions to meet frontline officers—that is such an important part of the work done by the PSNI. PSNI officers from all parts of the community serve in Derry/Londonderry, which is incredibly important because it means that they can be true community officers on the ground, understanding what is happening through their intelligence work. Although there was a coded warning, the PSNI officers had identified the vehicle and had started to take action. The hon. Gentleman is also right to comment on the delivery driver. It must have been a horrendous experience for a pizza delivery driver to find a gun at his head and to be put in that situation. There can be no excuse for the activities of the terrorists on Saturday, which we condemn fully.

On the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, I reiterate what the Prime Minister said earlier. We are steadfast in our support for the agreement, but the hon. Gentleman is right that there is a power vacuum in Northern Ireland. I want it filled. I am not sure that the ERG has a specific policy on it, but it probably agrees with me in wanting to see politicians in Northern Ireland back doing the job they were elected to do, which is making decisions on behalf of their constituents.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is pleasing to hear that lots of Ministers and shadow Ministers will visit Londonderry in the months ahead. My Select Committee—the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—will visit in the very near future. There may be no politicians at Stormont, but there will be plenty in the great city of Londonderry.

Does the Secretary of State agree that the most striking thing in the last few hours has been the reaction of the people of the city of Derry, who are clearly revolted by this latest outrage? Will she consider accelerating the negotiations on the Derry and Strabane city deal, because prosperity is exceptionally important in ensuring that such things do not happen?

Karen Bradley: I thank the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I am absolutely sure that its members will enjoy themselves immensely in what is a wonderful, welcoming, friendly and vibrant city. He is right that there have been, and will continue to be, a number of ministerial visits, including from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and from me.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer visited and wanted to meet people to talk about the Derry and Strabane city deal. My hon. Friend is right that prosperity is the answer. If people see a bright future for their city, they want to stand tall and fight for it. They want to stay and work and enjoy jobs and opportunities.

I agree with my hon. Friend that the reaction of the people of Derry/Londonderry has been extraordinary. It sends a clear message that the people of Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I am absolutely sure that its members will enjoy themselves immensely in what is a wonderful, welcoming, friendly and vibrant city. He is right that there have been, and will continue to be, a number of ministerial visits, including from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and from me.

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I agree with my hon. Friend that the reaction of the people of Derry/Londonderry has been extraordinary. It sends a clear message that the people of Northern
Ireland do not want a return to the troubles of nearly 21 years ago. They want to go forward with peace on their streets.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I join the Secretary of State in saying that parties and communities across Northern Ireland are utterly united in their condemnation of this terrible event. I also join her in praising the work of the PSNI and the emergency services, who have provided and continue to provide safety and security on the streets of Northern Ireland.

I also welcome what the Secretary of State said about this being unrelated to the current debate on the EU. It is also somewhat unrelated to what has happened in Stormont. The murders that I referenced earlier, which were committed by those same people, happened during a time when we had devolution and functioning democracy in Belfast at Stormont. Let us not legitimise in any way what these people are about by ascribing to them a cause. These people want to destroy communities on both sides and they want to disrupt. They want to bring nothing positive and have no agenda whatsoever. Therefore, I totally support what the Secretary of State said in that regard.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman puts the point extremely well. There is no excuse and there can be no justification whatever for those activities. He is right: these are activities that have gone on for far too long. A very small number of people—but determined people—want to cause damage. But he is right: we are all united. It reminds us that there is far more that unites us than divides us. We should all bear that in mind. I thank him for his comments. I agree with everything he said.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): This is a reminder that there are those still at large in Northern Ireland who choose the bomb over the ballot box. I join in all the tributes to the PSNI and the emergency services for yet again doing such a great job. This is nothing to do with Brexit at all, but the geographical location of Londonderry reminds us of the existence of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, so will the Secretary of State confirm that cross-border co-operation between An Garda Síochána and the PSNI is important and is working and that, as far as they are concerned, in pursuing these people, there will never be a border between them?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that, when you stand in Londonderry, you see the border is there—it is not a distant thing. People are travelling to and fro across that border every day to go to work and to doctor and hospital appointments, and to see family and friends. He is also right about the cross-border co-operation. The co-operation between An Garda Síochána and the PSNI has never been stronger, particularly as the commissioner of the Garda, Drew Hendry, was the deputy chief constable of the PSNI. It was very moving that Drew Hendry attended the national police memorial, which was held in Belfast in October, in his An Garda Síochána uniform to show solidarity with police services across the whole United Kingdom.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. This incident is of a sort that we all hoped belonged in the past but, in truth, those of us who are briefed regularly by police and security services in Northern Ireland have long known that this was not just possible but likely. The men of violence only have to get lucky once. This, though, should be an opportunity to turn a negative into a positive. It should be the moment when all parties of Northern Ireland understand the importance of giving a democratic response to a provocation of violence. This is why it is important that we have all the democratic institutions in Northern Ireland functioning. Will she inject fresh impetus to that process, if necessary bringing in an outside mediator to get things moving?

Karen Bradley: May I correct the record? I said Drew Hendry, but I meant Drew Harris. I apologise for that.

The right hon. Gentleman is right that the terrorists only have to get lucky once. Our security services and the PSNI have to continue to be lucky the whole time. They do incredible work and, from the briefings he receives, he will know just how much hard work happens. The threat level is “Severe”, which means that an attack is likely.

The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) made the point that there is no excuse for the situation, but the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) referred to the situation at Stormont and is right to say that politics can overcome violence—it overcame violence in 1988 and it will continue to do so. It is important that the politicians now do the right thing. We want to see them back in Stormont and making the decisions that need to be made on behalf of their constituents.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I completely agree with the Secretary of State when she completely disassociates any kind of violence from the Brexit negotiations. I recognise that we cannot in any way give the terrorists who carried out this attack any political credibility at all, but surely it would be better if all the parties in Northern Ireland were taking part in discussions at Stormont. Can she confirm that it is only one party that is preventing that from happening because of the red lines it has drawn?

Karen Bradley: I do not want to be drawn by my hon. Friend, who as a former Chair of the Select Committee knows politics in Northern Ireland better than most. I do not want to be drawn on the ongoing discussions and debates. All I will say is that I want to see the parties come back together, and we are working to find a mechanism by which we can do that.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) on the need for a return to normal politics—I agree with that—but it is not a normal situation when, in part of a democratic country, we have a situation where five parties form an Executive and only one of those five parties refuses to allow the formation of that Executive. Surely, when we get Stormont up and running again, as I hope will happen soon, we need to look at reforming the system, so that it is precisely what the hon. Gentleman described: normal politics.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman is right when he says that we want to see normal politics, but there is something extraordinary about the situation in
Northern Ireland. We have bi-party Government at times. That is something unusual; I think it is unique in the world. He talked about reforming the system. That must be a matter for the politicians in Northern Ireland. The UK Government stand ready to support the politicians in Northern Ireland to do what they need to do and what they want to do in order to make politics in Northern Ireland work and to have a sustainable Executive for the long term.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Compared with attacks in the past, this blast was somewhat amateur, in so far as the warning was given to the Samaritans in the west midlands and the blast was not that effective, thank God. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we now need to put all our efforts into identifying who these people are, to stop the encouragement of more people joining them?

Karen Bradley: My hon. and gallant Friend is right that this was a crude device. He mentioned the Samaritans. I should make the point that the warning was not given specifically to the Samaritans in the west midlands; when the Samaritans were called, the next adviser available happened to be in the west midlands. That is the way in which the Samaritans operate the system to ensure a speedy pick-up for people who call them. He is right, however, that it was a crude device and that we are very fortunate that it was not more successful, shall we say; we have not seen any injuries as a result of it. We should all be grateful for that.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in condemning this reprehensible act. I agree with her and other hon. Members who have said that there is no political excuse for it, but we are now fully two years since the breakdown of power sharing in Northern Ireland. This has been a salutary lesson and a basis for reforming the system. That is something unusual; I think it is unique in the world. He talked about reforming the system. That must be a matter for the politicians in Northern Ireland. We have bi-party Government at times. That is something unusual; I think it is unique in the world. He talked about reforming the system. That must be a matter for the politicians in Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman has significant experience in Northern Ireland, having worked there in the 1990s and 2000s and served as the shadow Secretary of State. As he knows, I continue to speak to all the main parties in Northern Ireland to find a basis on which we can bring the talks together. There is no point in just demanding that the parties come together and expecting that that will work. It has to be done on the basis of an appropriate framework and to have some possibility of success. That is what I am working to find.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I appreciate the Secretary of State’s remark that it only takes a very small number of terrorists to have a disproportionate effect, and I appreciate the significance and sensitivities of ongoing investigations, but can she tell the House whether any arrests have been made—the BBC has already reported that they have been—and, if so, whether any of those arrested are connected with identified Irish republican groups?

Karen Bradley: The PSNI has said on record that it has arrested five people, but it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage because of the ongoing security incidents in the city today.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I live in Londonderry, 3 miles from the scene of the bombing, and some of my constituents were in the vicinity, although they were thankfully unharmed. I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, particularly her call at the end for information to be given to the police. May I go further and ask her to respond positively to the offer from the Labour spokesperson? She is aware of a group called Unity of Purpose in Londonderry. All of us politicians regularly meet business people and others in the private sector not only to condemn such violence, but to take steps to ensure that information is given to the police and that those apprehended are brought before the courts. A positive response to that offer would be a physical manifestation of solidarity with us all.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman welcomed me to Londonderry a few months ago—it was an honour to be there—and introduced me to several of his constituents. I was very warmly welcomed. His idea about Unity of Purpose is a very good one, and we will look into it.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): The requirement on the PSNI to investigate the past puts pressure on its ability to investigate and police the present. Given the present threat level, does my right hon. Friend agree that we must find a better way to investigate legacy cases in particular?

Karen Bradley: I agree with my hon. Friend, and that is why we have consulted on how to reform the system for dealing with deaths in the troubles—to enable the PSNI to police today, not the past.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): This attack should be condemned, and I welcome the support given to organisations in Londonderry/Derry promoting peace. The Assistant Chief Constable has said that the New IRA was involved. Will the Secretary of State confirm that it is a proscribed organisation, and that proscription brings with it the potential for intelligence-led policing and could permit other offences, such as that of supporting those who perpetrated this act, to be brought before the courts?

Karen Bradley: I can confirm what the right hon. Gentleman has said.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The Secretary of State pointed out that Londonderry was the first ever UK city of culture in 2013. Can she confirm, particularly in the absence of devolved government, that the UK Government will step in to provide whatever assistance is needed on the ground to keep the local economy flourishing, as it has been doing in recent years?

Karen Bradley: The shadow Secretary of State raised that point, but I did not respond to it, for which I apologise. He and my hon. Friend are right that affected businesses and residents will need support. We will need to consider exactly what is needed and what the UK Government can do to support them.
Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Secretary of State has welcomed, as we all welcome, the overwhelming condemnation of this dreadful car bombing. I also welcome her clear statement that no one can make Brexit an excuse. We all have to be careful about the words we use in Northern Ireland, so will she use this opportunity to say that she regrets talking about border polls in the context of Brexit? Her comments were condemned by Alex Kane, a very eminent journalist who writes for newspapers on both sides of community, as “both stupid and deliberately provocative”.

Karen Bradley: He was talking about rumours and supposition; I have never spoken about any of those matters in public.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): As a former soldier who served in Northern Ireland, may I point out the courage of the police and others who responded to this terrible bombing? The IRA and these terrorist thugs have an unpleasant habit of planting follow-up bombs, which are not uncommon. Unlike others, those people run towards these areas, so there is always the chance of the rescuers themselves being blown up. Does my right hon. Friend have any plans to look at the law surrounding the sentencing of these thugs? In my view, those who have no regard for life should spend the rest of theirs in jail.

Karen Bradley: I agree with my hon. Friend, who has personal experience in Northern Ireland, about the extraordinary character of the officers in the PSNI. We should all pay tribute to them for serving every day in the face of that threat. On sentencing, I think he is referring to the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, which was agreed following the Good Friday agreement and the referendum of the people of Northern Ireland, and relates specifically to troubles-related deaths, not to the criminality we see in Northern Ireland today.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): What happened in Derry at the weekend was a disgrace and ran contrary to the wish of the people of that city and Northern Ireland, and relates specifically to troubles-related deaths, not to the criminality we see in Northern Ireland today. Does the Secretary of State agree that a robust policing and security response is required, and that we need to concentrate now on ending the political vacuum that allows these anti-peace process elements to thrive?

Karen Bradley: Of course we need a robust police response, and that is exactly what we are seeing, but we also need a strong community response, and that again is what we have seen. I know that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the way in which the community has united in condemnation of this act. It has no place and is not what we want. On the restoration of devolved government, as has been said, there is no excuse for what happened and there can be no link to the lack of a sitting Executive but, that said, we do need a sitting Executive.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): When one visits Londonderry, it is remarkable to see what a friendly and open city it is. It is not a city that should be defined by a handful of extremists who have never accepted the democratic wishes of the people of Northern Ireland or the peace process, whatever excuse they might now try to advance for their actions. Does the Secretary of State agree it is vital that our security services are given all support possible to deal with the situation and that the people involved feel the full force of the law?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to make sure the PSNI has the powers it needs to operate, along with the security services, in doing the fantastic job it does. The reduction in the number of incidents is a great testament to the work of the security services and the PSNI, and we want to make sure that that continues.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. How will she ensure the PSNI has enough resources to investigate not simply this despicable incident, but the terrorist cell going by the name of the New IRA? What Home Office support has been sought to make available all the skills and resources needed to uncover and deal with the terrorist cell on British soil? Have any discussions taken place with the Garda Síochána to prevent IRA activity in Donegal, just across the border, in terms of weapons, bomb-making materials and training?

Karen Bradley: A number of the hon. Gentleman’s questions are of an operational nature and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on operational details, suffice it to say that the Government stand four-square behind the PSNI in the work it does.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The 300 extra officers announced have been welcomed, including by constituents of mine from Northern Ireland, but they are for Brexit planning. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said, the number of officers is still below the number recommended for the PSNI. In the Secretary of State’s conversations with the police and security services, how many more police officers do they say they want to deal with the ongoing security threat?

Karen Bradley: The PSNI and the security services do a fantastic job every single day in thwarting plots to disrupt life and to cause injury and harm to innocent civilians in the way we saw on Saturday night. As was said earlier, the terrorists need to get lucky only once; we must work relentlessly. The Government consider business cases for additional resources, as they do all such business cases, to determine what is appropriate.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that there is a severe terror threat in Northern Ireland, but only a moderate terror threat here. Will there be any alteration in the terror threat here as a result of Northern Ireland terror that could permeate the national border?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism in Northern Ireland is severe, but the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism in Great Britain is moderate. Those threat levels are assessed independently of the Government. We are governed by the assessments of the security services and others in determining the threat levels.
Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The current Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has overseen a deterioration in cross-border relations because of his belligerent behaviour towards Britain during the Brexit negotiations. Notwithstanding the hysterical reaction of the Irish Government to Britain’s decision to leave the EU, can the Secretary of State assure us that, not just at a police level but at a political level, security co-operation continues?

Karen Bradley: All I can say is that relations between the Police Service of Northern Ireland and An Garda Síochána are at an all-time high and continue to be good. They work towards the same ends: to thwart the terrorists wherever they may be operating.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I join in the condemnation from Members on both sides of the House of this appalling terrorist attack, and welcome the strong community response from the good people of Derry. The Secretary of State referred to ongoing negotiations for a city deal. What progress has been made in those negotiations?

Karen Bradley: All city regions that apply for city deals must go through a process, but negotiations are ongoing, and work is being done by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Treasury to ensure that the Derry and Strabane city deal can be delivered.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Last week I met representatives of the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland to discuss the fantastic job that police officers and the Prison Service do there in very difficult circumstances, in the face of the incredible threat posed by the terrorists. As the Secretary of State will know, they have not received a pay award for some years, unlike police and prison officers across the rest of the United Kingdom. One reason for that is the absence of any Minister, but another is budgetary. Will the Secretary of State undertake to do all that she can, particularly in the current budget round, to ensure that police and prison officers working in those conditions are given the reward that they deserve?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady is right to mention not just the PSNI and the security services, but the prison officers who are working under immense pressure and do a fantastic job. She is also right to highlight the decisions that need to be taken by Ministers in Northern Ireland with regard to public sector pay. The UK Government are currently undertaking budget-related work. There are restrictions and limits when it comes to what I can do as Secretary of State, because many of these matters are devolved, but I note the points that the hon. Lady raises.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I echo the condemnation that has been expressed, and, indeed, the praise for the police and other emergency services. As my party’s Defence spokesperson, may I specifically mention the ammunition technical officers who are deployed all too frequently in Northern Ireland? They were deployed three times a week in 2015 and once a week in 2016, and they are still being called regularly—every week—to a dangerous situation, be that related to bombs, improvised explosive devices, under-car booby traps or hoaxes. I believe it was wrong when, in 2017, the Cabinet Office refused to honour those great servicemen with a general service medal. Given their activities last night, two years ago—when Adrian Ismay was killed in my constituency—and each and every week in dealing with an ongoing terrorist threat, may I ask the Secretary of State to engage with the Defence Secretary and the Cabinet Office to right that wrong?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman refers to yet more incredibly brave individuals who work hard to ensure that we are all safe, and that the people of Northern Ireland, in particular, can sleep soundly in their beds. Sadly, on Saturday night, a number of people managed to get through so that some were not able to do that, which is something that we do not want to see. As for the hon. Gentleman’s specific point about recognition for those individuals, I suggest that he takes it up with the Secretary of State for Defence, but I will raise it with my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office as well.

BILL PRESENTED

EUROPEAN UNION (WITHDRAWAL) (NO. 3)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Yvette Cooper, supported by Nicky Morgan, Norman Lamb, Hilary Benn, Nick Boles, Liz Kendall and Sir Oliver Letwin, presented a Bill to make provision in connection with the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 321).
Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I should inform the House that notification has been received that the Scottish Parliament has agreed to the legislative consent motion in respect of this Bill. Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

New Clause 1

ANNUAL REPORT ON THE COST OF HEALTHCARE ARRANGEMENTS

'(1) The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament an annual report setting out all expenditure and income arising from each healthcare arrangement made under this Act.

(2) The annual report laid under subsection (1) must include, but is not limited to—

(a) all payments made by the government of the United Kingdom in respect of healthcare arrangements for healthcare provided outside the United Kingdom to British citizens;

(b) all payments received by the government of the United Kingdom in reimbursement of healthcare provided by the United Kingdom to all non-British citizens;

(c) the number of British citizens treated under healthcare arrangements outside of the United Kingdom;

(d) the number of non-British citizens treated under healthcare arrangements within the United Kingdom;

(e) any and all outstanding payments owed to or by the government of the United Kingdom in respect of healthcare arrangements made before this Act receives Royal Assent; and

(f) any and all administrative costs faced by NHS Trusts in respect of healthcare arrangements.

(3) The information required under section 2(a) and 2(b) above must be listed by individual country in every annual report.”—[Justin Madders.]"  

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.45 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 1, in clause 5, page 3, line 44, leave out subsections (5) and (6) and insert—

'“(5) Any statutory instrument which contains regulations issued under this Act may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before Parliament and approved by a resolution of each House.”’

This amendment would make all regulations issued under this Act subject to the affirmative procedure and require approval from Parliament before they become law.

Justin Madders: We want to ensure that there are appropriate safeguards with regard to costs, not least because the Bill currently gives the Secretary of State authority not only to facilitate a continuation of existing arrangements, but to enter into any number of bilateral agreements with individual member states, with very little opportunity for parliamentary scrutiny. It also provides the authority to strengthen existing reciprocal healthcare agreements with countries outside the EU, or to implement new ones across the globe, in line with the Government’s aspiration to develop trading arrangements with countries beyond the EU. There is therefore a potential for the establishment of multiple complex agreements.

New clause 1 addresses the important point that the Bill before us is rightly intended to provide for all reciprocal healthcare arrangements in the future, and to provide for all eventualities. As we know, a no-deal Brexit could lead to a multitude of new bilateral agreements within the EU27, let alone the rest of the world. At this stage, none of us can be clear about how many of those agreements will come into being. We cannot assess their likely cost or impact, and, indeed, the Government’s own impact assessment is inadequate in that regard. It suggests that the cost will be similar to, or lower than, the current £630 million per year.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend has mentioned potential bilateral agreements with different countries. Does he agree that there could be a problem if our citizens are not covered when travelling to those countries for a variety of purposes, and insurance companies send premiums through the roof? That is always a big factor, even with the current arrangements in Europe.

Justin Madders: It is true that there is some concern in the insurance industry about our potential failure to secure bilateral agreements. I think it inevitable that unless those agreements are secured, premiums will rise. That is why the Opposition support the thrust of the Bill.

It is impossible to provide reliable estimates of the costs of the new agreements in advance without knowing who they would be with or what they would cover. The British Medical Association has said that any prediction of costs is likely to be unreliable, and we cannot afford to give the Government carte blanche.

New clause 1 proposes a sensible and very reasonable requirement for the Government to report back to Parliament annually. It would require the Government to provide details of all payments made by the UK Government for all healthcare provided outside the UK to British citizens. It would also stipulate a requirement to provide details of all payments received by the UK Government as reimbursement for healthcare provided by the UK to all non-British citizens. It would also write into law a requirement for the Government to report back to Parliament annually. It would require the Government to provide details of all payments made by the UK Government for all healthcare provided outside the UK to British citizens. It would also stipulate a requirement to provide details of all payments received by the UK Government as reimbursement for healthcare provided by the UK to all non-British citizens. It would also provide an important opportunity to monitor efficiency in this area and may provide an incentive to address some of the concerns raised by the Public Accounts Committee in its 2017 report, “NHS treatment for overseas patients”, which stated that “the NHS has been recovering much less than it should”, and "The systems for cost recovery appear chaotic.”

Even with the Government’s recent funding announcements, the NHS continues to struggle. I am sure that the Minister would not want to see funds destined for patient care swallowed up by the additional administrative burden created by the introduction of a range of complex charging arrangements and a failure to recover the costs that have been incurred. It is imperative that hospital trusts are not required to shoulder additional financial burdens because of the costs of administering the collection of charges. That is why if the Government are, as the
Minister said in Committee, committed to transparency and parliamentary scrutiny, new clause 1 should be supported.

Turning briefly to the amendment that I tabled, we have discussed previously widely held concerns about the scope of this Bill that are exacerbated by the fact that the powers contained within it to create regulations will, in many cases, be subject only to the negative procedure. The Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee in the other place set out very clearly the potential impact of this Bill should my amendment not be accepted today. It said:

“If...the Secretary of State wished to fund wholly or entirely the cost of all mental health provision in the state of Arizona, or the cost of all hip replacements in Australia, the regulations would only be subject to the negative procedure.”

It added:

“Of course, these examples will not be priorities for any Secretary of State in this country”. I am sure that is the case, but we must consider how the powers could be used, not just how we would expect and hope them to be used.

There is always merit when examining legislation in considering all potential scenarios as well as the stated intentions of the Government at the time, and in such an unprecedented period of uncertainty it is prudent to consider all eventualities. As the Government have included these powers in the legislation we cannot simply consider the world as it is now, nor how it might be in a year or two—indeed, if anyone knows what the world will be like in two or three weeks’ time I will be very impressed. We need to look at what the world might be like in many years’ time and how the powers in the Bill can be used.

If we require further persuasion about the need for caution, the Committee set out in its report a devastating list of reasons why the negative procedure is inappropriate. It said:

“There is no limit to the amount of the payments. There is no limit to who can be funded world-wide. There is no limit to the types of healthcare being funded. The regulations can confer functions (that is, powers and duties, including discretions) on anyone anywhere. The regulations can delegate functions to anyone anywhere.”

The Committee concluded:

“In our view, the powers in clause 2(1) are inappropriately wide and have not been adequately justified by the Department. It is particularly unsatisfactory that exceedingly wide powers should be subject only to the negative procedure.”

Just for good measure, it went on to describe the powers sought in the Bill as “breath-taking”.

Parliament is not alone in having concerns about the scope of the clause and the lack of clarity about how the powers might be used. In the Committee evidence session, Raj Jethwa, director of policy at the British Medical Association said:

“We would like to see much more emphasis on scrutiny of all the discussions in the arrangements going forward.”—[Official Report, Healthcare (International Arrangements) Public Bill Committee, 27 November 2018; c. 6, Q4.]

Picking up on the Committee’s comments, despite the Government having ample opportunity both on Second Reading and in Committee to justify the need for these exceedingly wide powers, I believe that the arguments that they advanced during the passage of the Bill have not only failed to do so, but have strengthened the case for greater scrutiny. The Minister conceded in Committee:

“The Bill also provides flexibility to fund healthcare even where there is no bilateral agreement, which we might explore using in exceptional circumstances to secure healthcare for certain groups of people.”

That is the nub of it: we know the well-rehearsed and necessary reasons why the Bill is required to secure the continuation of arrangements as we leave the EU, but it is on the record that the Bill can potentially do far more than that. We do not know what those exceptional circumstances are, and we do not know who those groups of people might be, and even if the Minister were able to set out here and now what he was referring to in that statement, he cannot bind a successor to that. The Bill gives the Secretary of State what I might describe as Martini powers: any time, any place, anywhere. If he is to have such wide powers they must at the very least be subject to the affirmative procedure.

The Minister also said in Committee that not only would the Bill encapsulate existing healthcare agreements but that it “will potentially add to their number as part of future health and trade policy.”—[Official Report, Healthcare (International Arrangements) Public Bill Committee, 29 November 2018; c. 23-24.]

That is also a concern. I do not know whether the Minister intended it to come across as it did, but it sounded very much to me as if the Government were intending to couple trade negotiations with access to healthcare. I hope that that is not the case.

Many people have expressed concern over a number of years that the Government appear willing to open up the NHS to American private healthcare companies as part of trade negotiations, but I am not sure that many people imagined that the Government also had designs on opening up the NHS to patients around the world as part of a strategy to secure trade deals with other nations. Perhaps I am wrong about that, but it is clear that the Bill can be used in that way, which is why any arrangements ratified under it need proper scrutiny.

We also to consider the impact of new arrangements on the NHS. Alastair Henderson, chief executive of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, said in the Committee evidence session:

“Both clinicians and health organisations are concerned that we could end up with a system that is both administration-intensive and time-intensive.”—[Official Report, Healthcare (International Arrangements) Public Bill Committee, 27 November 2018; c. 3, Q4.]

We went through some of the implications of that when discussing new clause 1.

Finally, there is a practical element to this. As we know, under the negative procedure, once an instrument is laid in draft it cannot be made law if the draft is disapproved within 40 days. This would be done via a prayer against, usually by way of an early-day motion. If that is not invoked then the legislation is passed. Under the negative procedure, that is still a 40-day process in the best-case scenario, and if we leave without a deal the Secretary of State in the next three weeks will have to reach agreement with each of the 30-plus other countries, sign those agreements, draft statutory instruments and lay them before Parliament so they are with us no later than Friday 15 February, the last date on which
they could be laid in order for them to be passed by 29 March—and that is assuming they are not prayed against.

If we assume this Bill completes Third Reading today, that gives the Lords about three weeks to complete their consideration—and the Minister will no doubt be crossing his fingers that they do not table any amendments. That seems to be a tall order, and given the Committee’s comments on this amendment the Lords may well be minded to send the measure back to us, but in either case it all seems rather a tight, if not unrealistic, timetable.

I therefore urge the Minister to think through the practicalities of this; the affirmative procedure could be significantly quicker than the negative one, and it has the advantage of being far more transparent.

The Minister tried to reassure me in Committee that there would be adequate scrutiny by virtue of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, but I am afraid that that just does not cut the mustard. Under that Act, there is a specified process enabling Parliament to object to a treaty being ratified within 21 days, but that does not automatically lead to a debate and a thorough examination of the issues of concern. The Act simply says that in the event of an objection the Government must issue a statement setting out why they still want to ratify; this process could apparently be repeated ad infinitum, and crucially under the Act there is no requirement for a debate. It would be open to either Government or Opposition to set aside some of their allotted time to facilitate a debate, but there is no requirement to do so. In addition, there are exceptions that enable the Government to ratify treaties outside the Act—for example, if there are “exceptional circumstances”, which of course is a judgment that is within Government’s gift. The measure does not cover memorandums of understanding either, and some of the older reciprocal healthcare arrangements fall within that description.

Putting new agreements into force in these extraordinary circumstances is necessary, but we simply cannot accept the clause as it stands. No matter how well-intentioned everyone might be now, once that power has been given it is no longer easily taken back. Do Members want us to consider—and the Minister will no doubt be crossing his fingers that the Lords do not table any amendments. That seems to be a tall order, and given the Committee’s comments on this amendment the Lords may well be minded to send the measure back to us, but in either case it all seems rather a tight, if not unrealistic, timetable.

I therefore urge the Minister to think through the practicalities of this; the affirmative procedure could be significantly quicker than the negative one, and it has the advantage of being far more transparent.

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Putting new agreements into force in these extraordinary circumstances is necessary, but we simply cannot accept the clause as it stands. No matter how well-intentioned everyone might be now, once that power has been given away it is not easily taken back. Do Members want us to fund hip replacements in Arizona? Are Members comfortable with access to the NHS being used as a bargaining chip in trade deals? Of course not, so why do they not vote for the amendment tonight?

Martyn Day (Lindithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I suspect this debate will be slightly less contentious than the earlier statements, and probably a lot quicker.

The Bill basically gives powers to the Secretary of State to agree reciprocal deals. However, I believe that we will not get a better reciprocal arrangements than those we currently have. We recognise the need for all these arrangements to continue, and the Scottish Government will do all they can to work with the UK Government to ensure that they do, and of course we note the legislative consent motion that has been granted. Through the Joint Ministerial Committee we believe a common framework system can be achieved that ensures these specific health arrangements can be administered through common agreement between the UK and Scottish Governments. Clearly, Brexit threatens the loss of reciprocal healthcare arrangements for millions in Scotland and across the UK. The Bill’s impact assessment makes this conclusion in relation to 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.”

7 pm

In evidence to the House of Lords European Union Committee, a representative from the Association of British Insurers gave the rough estimate that in a no-deal scenario travel insurance premiums for EU travel could increase by between 10% and 20%. In Committee, we heard from Alissa Dolgova from the ABI, who informed us:

“Firms are currently pricing in the assumption that there will be a withdrawal agreement in place with a transitional period that will allow more time for the Government to enter into a reciprocal healthcare arrangement.”

There will therefore be a significant price to pay if there is no deal. There is real concern that the cost of health and travel insurance could become prohibitively high for many with underlying health conditions, and thus restrict travel arrangements. This concern was well illustrated in Committee by Fiona Loud, the policy director of Kidney Care UK, who advised us about people who undergo ongoing dialysis treatments while travelling abroad. She said:

“We have people who are taking the option to travel now because they have no idea what will happen after 29 March. For them, the ability to travel with confidence—I think there is something in the Bill about people being able to travel with confidence—is something they can do now, and they are not confident yet that they will be able to do that after 29 March.”

[Official Report, Healthcare (International Arrangements) Public Bill Committee, 27 November 2018; c. 13.]

She went on to advise that dialysis could cost about £1,000 a week.

Of course it is not just a no-deal scenario that we should be concerned about. The Prime Minister’s deal would have hugely damaging implications for our NHS and care services, depriving us of EEA doctors and nurses. The care sector is particularly reliant on EU citizens. The UK Migration Advisory Committee concluded that EEA migrants contribute more to health and social care in financial resources and through work than they consume in services. A November 2018 British Medical Association survey of 1,527 EEA-trained doctors across the UK found that 78% were unconvinced by promises that their rights would be protected in the event of a no-deal Brexit, 37% were unaware of the Westminster Government’s settled status scheme and 35% were considering moving abroad. Last year alone, we witnessed the loss of almost 2,500 experienced EEA nurses and midwives across the UK. In exit surveys, many EEA registrants gave continuing uncertainty about their future lives and careers as a significant factor in deciding to leave the register and the UK.

All these concerns would be compounded, should the reciprocal schemes cease and UK citizens return home to receive treatment. The British Medical Association and the Nuffield Trust have estimated that if all those people—mostly pensioners—were 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 cost around £1 billion. It would be fair to say that I have a number of concerns. Current progress appears to prioritise pensioners and, welcome though that is, it does not give enough
consideration to children and adults with long-term illnesses. The effect of having no reciprocal agreement in place on sick and/or disabled children of UK citizens living abroad implies that parents and carers will have to either pay for treatment or return to the UK. Those with long-term conditions will be disproportionately adversely affected, in terms of their ability to travel, by the cost of health and travel insurance. Under existing reciprocal arrangements, the average cost of care received by UK citizens in other EEA nations is frequently cheaper than the equivalent care would be if provided by the NHS, meaning that the UK spends less on care funded through existing reciprocal arrangements than it would if that care had to be provided domestically. In conclusion, we will not get better reciprocal arrangements than we already have. Ensuring that all current reciprocal health agreements remain intact and in place must be the bottom line, regardless of what form Brexit takes.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): It is a great pleasure to bring the Bill to its Report stage tonight. Before I address new clause 1 and amendment 1, it might help the House if I set out with clarity what the Bill actually does. It provides the powers to fund and arrange payments for healthcare for UK residents, or indeed former residents, outside the UK as well as to share the necessary data to facilitate this. In a deal scenario, the Bill’s powers would support the Government’s attempts and motivation to implement a future relationship with the EU from 2021 and bilateral arrangements with individual member states, should the EU agreement fall short. In a no-deal scenario, the powers would ensure that the UK was prepared for any outcome. This could include implementing any negotiated reciprocal healthcare arrangements, which might differ from the current EU arrangements, or making unilateral arrangements for UK nationals in order to assist with accessing healthcare abroad in exceptional circumstances. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for tabling new clause 1, because it gives me the opportunity to reiterate what I said in Committee about the important issue of financial reporting and facilitating parliamentary scrutiny. I note that, in Committee, the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) tabled exactly the same provision as new clause 1, and that it was defeated. I said at the time that I recognised the new clause as a device that Oppositions always used. That does not make it any less relevant, but I explained that the Government were committed to openness when it came to the managing of public money. Expenditure by the Department of Health and Social Care relating to EU reciprocal healthcare arrangements is currently published in this place in the form of annual resource accounts, and will continue to be so. However, given that we do not know the provisions and administrative processes of future reciprocal agreements, the Government are once again unable to accept the proposal. As now, the Department’s future expenditure on reciprocal healthcare would be subject to the existing Government reporting requirements.

However, the hon. Gentleman’s new clause asks the Government to place a statutory duty on future Administrations to collect and report on data, which we have not yet agreed to exchange with other countries. This cannot be appropriate. The frequency and detailed content of a financial report should and could be determined only when reciprocal healthcare agreements have been reached. Currently, the UK and other EU member states are able to collect data and report both nationally and at EU level, as provided for in the relevant EU regulations. Spending on EU healthcare is reported as part of the Department of Health and Social Care annual report and accounts laid before this place.

My Department is currently working to ensure that UK nationals can continue to access healthcare in the EU in exactly the same way as they do now, either through an agreement at EU level or through agreements with the relevant member states. In either case, we will have to agree how eligibility is evidenced, the way in which and frequency with which that information is exchanged and, of course, the reimbursement mechanisms that will govern the new agreements.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I have listened closely to what the Minister has said. It would be helpful if he could offer some reassurance to Irish citizens living in Northern Ireland who, under the terms of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement, are entitled to regard themselves as Irish citizens, British citizens or indeed both. I presume that their rights will continue unchanged in Northern Ireland after Brexit. Am I right?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady is completely correct. We explored that in Committee, and discussed the purposes of the common travel area. Indeed, there was an explicit debate in Committee on the arrangements for Northern Ireland. I am happy to confirm that to her.

Each of the agreements that we are seeking to strike could differ from country to country. Such agreements will have to take into account the operational possibilities and limitations of each contracting party, to ensure the smooth operation of reciprocal healthcare arrangements. This should include how NHS trusts in the UK can evidence eligibility for the treatment of non-UK citizens in the most efficient and least burdensome manner. Only when these technical details are known will the Government be able to speak confidently to the specific measures that we can report on for each country. Regardless of the specifics of any arrangements entered into, and as with all departmental expenditure, reciprocal healthcare costs are and will continue to be authorised by the Treasury supply process and to be included in the Department’s annual estimates, as well as being included in the annual resource accounts, which are audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General. I said in Committee that I hoped that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston would be satisfied by that commitment to transparency, and I give that commitment again tonight. With that, I hope that he will feel able to withdraw new clause 1.

Turning to amendment 1, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston again raised the important issue of appropriate levels of parliamentary scrutiny. The Government clearly recognise the importance of such scrutiny for this Bill and for secondary legislation made under it. The hallmarks of an effective and responsible parliamentary system are the processes by which we draft, consider and test legislation, and the appropriate parliamentary procedure for the scrutiny of regulations made under this Bill is the negative resolution procedure.
The exception to that is where provision within regulations is needed to make consequential changes to amend, repeal or revoke primary legislation. Consequently, the Government are once again resisting that amendment.

As I have said previously, the powers in this Bill provide the Government with both the flexibility and the capacity to implement detailed and complex arrangements concerning healthcare access abroad. The remit of our regulation-making powers is tightly focused. They can be used only to give effect to healthcare agreements or arrange, provide for or fund healthcare abroad. Therefore, the subject matter to which the regulations relate is narrow. I say again that when regulations amend, repeal or revoke primary legislation, they will of course be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure, which is the appropriate level of scrutiny for such powers. However, where statutory instruments do not make changes to primary legislation, and deal with procedural, administrative or technical provisions, they should be subject to the negative resolution procedure, and that is reflected in our approach to this Bill.

We have been clear about our intentions for reciprocal healthcare in the context of exiting the EU. In the short term, our policy is to maintain the current system of reciprocal healthcare with the EU on a transitional basis until the end of 2020. That would happen automatically if there is an implementation period, and it is something that we are seeking to agree individually with member states in the event of no deal.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Minister's confirmation of the Government's intentions behind this Bill. Will he confirm that the nonsense we heard from the shadow Minister about funding hip operations in Arizona is absolute tosh? While the shadow Minister may be enthusiastic about the healthcare system in the United States, will the Minister confirm that we are not?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. I said continually in Committee and I say it again now that this Bill is tightly focused in terms of the regulations that can be made under it. We want long-term reciprocal healthcare arrangements with the EU or relevant member states, and that is the Bill's focus.

When the UK negotiates an international healthcare agreement in the future, the most important elements setting out the terms of that agreement would, as Members should expect, be included in the agreement itself. Such agreements are likely to contain all the detail of which Parliament may be enthusiastic about the healthcare system in the United States, will the Minister confirm that we are not?

7.15 pm

As future agreements are subject to negotiation or yet to exist, the House will understand why it is not possible to provide draft regulations at this stage. However, I assure Members that, when implementation regulations are needed, we will publish any draft regulations during the passage of this Bill if possible. I thank the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston for raising this vital issue and for the opportunity to put it clearly on the record that this Government are committed to proper parliamentary scrutiny of reciprocal arrangements. With that assurance, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not press new clause 1 or amendment 1 to a vote.

Question put. That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 260, Noes 295.

Division No. 297

[AYES]

Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradhaw, rh Mr Ben
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burdon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Caddy, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa

Coffey, Ann
Coope, Julie
Coopee, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creaey, Stella
Craddock, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria

Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Coopee, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creaey, Stella
Craddock, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria

[7.16 pm]
Debonoare, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Eldford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fitpatrick, Jim
Fint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Friith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nick
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harries, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lamb, rh Mr Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, rh Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Mahlota, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonald, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Omm, Melanie
Onurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridge
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Gobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Aldous, Peter
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, rh 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
Breton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Colleen Fletcher and Stephanie Peacock

NOES

Cash, Sir William
caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chope, 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
Davis, Chris
davies, David T. C.
davies, Glyn
davies, Mims
davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
djaniqal, Mr Jonathan
docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
dorries, Ms Nadine
double, Steve
dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Amendment proposed: 1, page 3, line 44, leave out subsections (5) and (6) and insert—

“(5) Any statutory instrument which contains regulations issued under this Act may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before Parliament and approved by a resolution of each House.” — (Justin Madders.)

This amendment would make all regulations issued under this Act subject to the affirmative procedure and require approval from Parliament before they become law.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 261, Noes 298.

A YES

Abrahams, Debbie  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Amesbury, Mike  
Antoniacci, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Brake, nave  
Bragh, Mr Andrew  
Brown, Alan  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, Mr Nicholas  

Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Swire, rh Sir Hugo  
Syma, Sir Robert  
Thomas, Derek  
Thomson, Ross  
Throut, Maggie  
Tohurk, Kelly  
Tomlinson, Justin  
Tomlinson, Michael  
Tracey, Craig  
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie  
Truss, rh Elizabeth  
Tugendhat, Tom  
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward  
Vara, Mr Shailesh  
Vickers, Martin  
Villiers, rh Theresa  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Wallace, rh Mr Benjamin  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Watling, Giles  
Whately, Helen  
Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wilson, rh Sammy  
Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
Wood, Mike  
Wragg, Mr William  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim  

Tellers for the Noses:  
Jo Churchill and  
Michelle Donelan

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 5

REGULATIONS AND DIRECTIONS

Amendment proposed: 1, page 3, line 44, leave out subsections (5) and (6) and insert—

“(5) Any statutory instrument which contains regulations issued under this Act may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before Parliament and approved by a resolution of each House.” — (Justin Madders.)

This amendment would make all regulations issued under this Act subject to the affirmative procedure and require approval from Parliament before they become law.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 261, Noes 298.

Division No. 298  

AYES

Berger, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brok, Deidre  
Brown, Alan  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  

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  
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus  
Garnier, Mark  
Gauke, rh Mr David  
Ghana, Ms Nusrat  
Gillian, rh Dame Cheryl  
Girvan, Paul  
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, Stephen  
Hancock, rh Matt  
Hands, rh Greg  
Harper, rh Mr Mark  
Harrington, Richard  
Harris, Rebecca  
Harrison, Trudy  
Hart, Simon  
Hayes, rh Sir John  
Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
Heappey, James  
Heaton-Harris, Chris  
Heaton-Jones, Peter  
Henderson, Gordon  
Herbert, rh Nick  
Hoare, Simon  
Hollinrake, Kevin  
Hollobone, Mr Philip  
Holloway, Adam  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hughes, Eddie  
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy  
Hurd, rh Mr Nick  
Jack, Mr Alister  
James, Margot  
Javid, rh Sajid  
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil  
Jenkins, rh Sir Bernard  
Jenkins, Andrea  
Jennick, Robert  
Johnson, rh Boris  
Johnson, Mr Caroline  
Johnson, Gareth  
Jones, Andrew  
Jones, rh Mr David  
Jones, Mr Marcus  
Kawczyński, Daniel  
Keegan, Gillian  
Kennedy, Seema  
Kerr, Stephen  
Knight, rh Sir Greg  
Knight, Julian  
Kwarteng, Kwasi  
Lamont, John  
Lancaster, rh Mark  
Latham, Mrs Pauline  
Leadsom, rh Andrea  
Lee, Dr Philip  
Lefroy, Jeremy  
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver  
Lewer, Andrew  
Lewis, rh Brandon  
Lewis, rh Dr Julian  
Lidington, rh Mr David  
Little Bengelly, Emma  
Lopez, Julia  
Lopresti, Jack  
Loughton, Tim  
Mackinlay, Craig  
Maclean, Rachel  
Main, Mrs Anne  
Malthouse, Kit  
Mann, Scott  
Masterton, Paul  
Maynard, Paul  
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick  
McPartland, Stephen  
McVey, rh Ms Esther  
Menzies, Mark  
Mercer, Johnny  
Merriman, Huw  
Metcalfe, Stephen  
Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
Milling, Amanda  
Mills, Nigel  
Milton, rh Anne  
Moore, Damien  
Morgan, rh Nicky  
Morris, rh Anne Marie  
Morgan, rh Nicky  
Morris, rh Anne Marie  
Morris, David  
Morris, James  
Morton, Wendy  
Mundell, rh David  
Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
Munnison, Dr Andrew  
Neill, Robert  
Newton, Sarah  
Nokes, rh Caroline  
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  
Philp, Chris  
Pinner, rh Christopher  
Poulter, Dr Dan  
Pow, Rebecca  
Prentis, Victoria  
Prisk, rh Mr Mark  
Pritchard, Mark  
Pursglove, Tom  
Quin, Jeremy  
Quince, Will  
Raab, rh Dominic  
Redwood, rh John  
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
Roberts, rh Mr Laurence  
Robinson, Gavin  
Robinson, Mary  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Ross, Douglas  
Rowley, Lee  
Rudd, rh Amber  
Rutley, David  
Scully, Paul  
Seely, rh Mr Bob  
Selous, Andrew  
Shannon, Jim  
Shapps, rh Grant  
Sharma, Alok  
Shelbrooke, Alec  
Simpson, David  
Simpson, rh Mr Keith  
Skidmore, Chris  
Smith, Chloe  
Smith, Henry  
Smith, rh Royston  
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas  
Soubry, rh Anna  
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline  
Spencer, Mark  
Stephenson, Andrew  
Stevenson, John  
Stewart, Bob  
Stewart, Iain  
Stewart, Rory  
Stride, rh Mel  
Stuart, Graham  
Sturdy, Julian  
Sunak, Rishi  

[7.31 pm]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tellers for the Ayes:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie Peacock and</td>
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<tr>
<th>NOES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bone, Mr Peter</td>
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| Bryant, Chris | Buck, Ms Karen | Burden, Richard | Burgon, Richard | Butler, Dawn | Byrne, rh Liam | Cadbury, Ruth | Cameron, Dr Lisa | Campbell, rh Sir Alan | Campbell, Mr Ronnie | Carden, Dan | Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | Champion, Sarah | Chapman, Douglas | Chapman, Jenny | Charalamous, Bambos | Cherry, Joanna | Clwyd, rh Ann | Coffey, Ann | Cooper, Julie | Cooper, Rosie | Cooper, rh Yvette | Cowan, Ronnie | Coyle, Neil | Crausby, Sir David | Creagh, Mary | Creasy, Stella | Cruddas, Jon | Cryer, John | Cummins, Judith | Cunningham, Alex | Cunningham, Mr Jim | Daby, Janet | Dakin, Nic | David, Wayne | Davies, Geraint | Day, Martyn | De Cordova, Marsha | De Piero, Gloria | Deboisnona, Thangam | Dent Coad, Emma | Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh | Docherty-Hughes, Martin | Dodds, Anneliese | Doughty, Stephen | Dowd, Peter | Drew, Dr David | Dromey, Jack | Eagle, Ms Angela | Eagle, Maria | Efford, Clive | Elliott, Julie | Ellman, Dame Louise | Elmore, Chris | Esterson, Bill | Evans, Chris | Farrelly, Paul | Farron, Tim | Fellows, Marion | Fitzpatrick, Jim | Flint, rh Caroline | Fovargue, Yvonne | Foxcroft, Vicky | Frith, James | Furniss, Gill | Gaffney, Hugh | Gapes, Mike | Gardiner, Barry | George, Ruth | Getlings, Stephen | Gibson, Patricia | Gill, Preet Kaur | Glindon, Mary | Goodman, Helen | Grahy, Patrick | Grant, Peter | Gray, Neil | Green, Kate | Greenwood, Lilian | Greenwood, Margaret | Griffith, Nia | Grogan, John | Gwynne, Andrew | Haigh, Louise | Hamilton, Fabian | Hanson, David | Hardy, Emma | Harman, rh Ms Harriet | Harris, Carolyn | Hayes, Helen | Hayman, Sue | Healey, rh John | Hendrick, rh Mark | Hendry, Drew | Hepburn, rh Stephen | Hermon, Lady | Hill, Mike | Hillier, Meg | Hobhouse, Wera | Hodgson, Mrs Sharon | Hoey, Kate | Holliern, Kate | Hosie, Stuart | Howarth, rh Mr George | Huq, Dr Rupa | Hussain, Inman | Jardine, Christine | Jarvis, Dan | Johnson, Diana | Jones, Darren | Jones, Gerald | Jones, Jonathan | Jones, Graham P. | Jones, rh Mr Kevan | Jones, Sahitah | Jones, Susan Elan | Keeley, Barbara | Khan, Afzal | Killen, Ged | Kincock, Stephen | Kyle, Peter | Laird, Lesley | Lamb, rh Norman | Lammy, rh Mr Daniel | Lavery, Ian | Law, Chris | Lee, Karen | Leslie, Mr Chris | Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma | Lewis, Clive | Linden, David | Lloyd, Stephen | Lloyd, Tony | Long Bailey, Rebecca | Lucas, Caroline | Madders, Justin | Mahmood, Mr Khalid | Mahmood, Shabana | Malhotra, Seema | Mann, John | Marsden, Gordon | Martin, Sandy | Mascoll, Rachael | Matheson, Christian | McCabe, Steve | McCarthy, Kerry | McDonagh, Slcibhain | McDonald, Stuart Malcolm | McDonald, Stuart C. | McDonnell, rh John | McFadden, rh Mr Pat | McGinn, Conor | McGovern, Alison | McIntones, Liz | McKinell, Catherine | McManus, Jim | McMorrin, Anna | Mearns, Ian | Monaghan, Carol | Moon, Mrs Madeleine | Morden, Jessica | Morgan, Stephen | Morris, Grahame | Nandy, Lisa | Newlands, Gavin | Norris, Alex | O'Hara, Brendan | Onasanya, Fiona | Onn, Melanie | Onwurah, Chi | Osamor, Kate | Owen, Albert | Pennycook, Matthew | Perkins, Toby | Phillips, Jess | Phillipson, Bridget | Picock, Laura | Platt, Jo | Pollard, Luke | Pound, Stephen | Powell, Lucy | Qureshi, Yasmin | Rashid, Faisal | Rayner, Angela | Reed, Mr Steve | Rees, Christina | Reynolds, Emma | Reynolds, Jonathan | Rimmer, Ms Marie | Rodda, Matt | Ruane, Chris | Russell-Moyle, Lloyd | Ryan, rh Joan | Saville Roberts, Liz | Sheerman, Mr Barry | Sherriff, Paula | Shuker, Mr Gavin | Skinner, Mr Dennis | Slaughter, Andy | Smeeth, Ruth | Smith, Cat | Smith, Eleanor | Smith, Jeff | Smith, Laura | Smith, Nick | Smith, Owen | Smyth, Karin | Snell, Gareth | Sobel, Alex | Spellar, rh John | Storrar, rh Keir | Stephens, Chris | Stevens, Jo | Stone, Jamie | Streeting, Wes | Sweeney, Mr Paul | Tami, rh Mark | Thewlis, Alison | Thomas-Symonds, Nick | Thornberry, rh Emily | Timms, rh Stephen | Trickett, Jon | Turley, Anna | Turner, Karl | Twigg, Stephen | Twist, Liz | Umunna, Chuka | Vaz, Valerie | Walker, Thelma | West, Catherine | Western, Matt | Whitehead, Dr Alan | Whitford, Dr Philippa | Williams, Dr Paul | Williamson, Chris | Wilson, Phil | Woodcock, John | Yasin, Mohammad | Zeichner, Daniel |

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The passage of the Bill and demonstrated a shared contribution, who have engaged so constructively with me. I am grateful to all Members, including those who recently now read the Third time.

Stephen Hammond: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

We have had a productive debate on the Bill, and I am grateful to all Members, including those who recently contributed, who have engaged so constructively with the passage of the Bill and demonstrated a shared interest in its content.

Tellers for the Noes:
Michelle Donelan and Jo Churchill

Question accordingly negatived.

Third Reading

7.43 pm
commitment to protecting the healthcare-access options of UK nationals in the EU. The support shown to the Bill throughout its passage shows the value of reciprocal healthcare. I wish to put on record my appreciation for the consensual approach shown by all parties in the House, and particularly to note the contributions from the hon. Members for Burnley (Julie Cooper) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Not only in Committee but on Report, they raised objections but were very helpful in respect of the passage of the Bill.

Although the Bill is short, it is nevertheless important. The powers it contains will ensure that we are prepared, whatever the outcomes of exiting the EU are, and also that we are able better to implement complex reciprocal healthcare agreements with members and non-member states. Powers under the Bill will enable the UK to fund and give effect to our future relationship with the EU on reciprocal healthcare. The Bill allows us to look to the future. The powers it contains will allow us to implement strengthened reciprocal healthcare arrangements, or new ones with countries outside the EU. It is necessary to provide the Government with the powers to ensure a smooth transition from our current relationship with the EU to the future one.

Let me take this opportunity to thank those Members who served on the Public Bill Committee, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) and the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), who ably chaired the Committee. I reiterate my thanks to those who gave oral evidence to the Committee and to those who provided written evidence, including Mr Alastair Henderson, Mr Raj Jethwa, Ms Alisa Dolgova and Ms Fiona Loud. Their expertise and perspectives were vital in understanding the importance and impact of reciprocal healthcare arrangements to medical professionals, insurers and, most importantly, the patients. I also put on record my thanks to my officials, who have guided me through this process.

As a responsible Government, it is important that we plan not only for every eventuality currently before us but for the future. The Bill is intended to provide reassurance to UK nationals living in the EU or those planning to travel to the EU. Again, I thank Members for their support. I commend the Bill to the House.

7.46 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): First, as the Bill is given its Third Reading, may I thank all Members who have contributed?

We will not oppose the Bill at this stage, as we acknowledge the importance of safeguarding healthcare for the estimated 190,000 UK expats living in the EU and the 50 million nationals who travel abroad to EEA countries each year. That is not to say that the Bill is perfect—for far from it. There are issues that for us remain unresolved, and we are anxious about the implications of the sweeping powers that the Bill will give the Secretary of State. We hope that Members in the other place will pick up on some of these concerns.

We are now only 67 days away from formally leaving the EU. On Second Reading—which, coincidentally, was 67 days ago—there was a clear assumption on the Government’s part that an agreement with the EU would be reached and that arrangements would carry on as now. I do not think it is an understatement to say that is now looking rather less certain.

I said at the time that the Government’s own impact assessment seemed seriously to underestimate the consequences of a no-deal scenario. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said earlier, the impact assessment set out how the costs of establishing future reciprocal healthcare arrangements on the same basis as now would be £630 million per year. It then went on to estimate that, in the event of a no-deal scenario, the costs would be expected to be similar or less, depending on the number of schemes that were established. It has never been made clear why the costs might be less, unless we stop reciprocating with other countries, and I do not believe anyone expects that.

The British Medical Association and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health have expressed concern that, should no EU-wide reciprocal agreement be achievable, the significant costs of establishing bilateral reciprocal arrangements with the EU and EEA countries would in future fall on the NHS. Perhaps in the scenario we now face, we will be able to replicate exactly what is in place now, but that is not certain, and the implications are potentially significant. I therefore ask the Minister whether he would mind keeping us updated on the progress in bilateral discussions.

UK state pensioners living abroad account for 75% of the total amount that we spend on reciprocal healthcare, and they will be anxious to know that they will be able to enjoy the same access as they do now. If not, those with chronic conditions or complex healthcare needs may need insurance that is prohibitively expensive—if it can be found at all. The potential implications of that cannot be underestimated. For those travelling abroad, the BMA and others have said that, without a reciprocal healthcare agreement, patients with disabilities would also be among the most affected. Again, for those groups, as much information on progress as possible would be appreciated.

Associated with that is a lack of clarity over how dispute resolution will work in the event of bilateral agreements being necessary. We know from what the Minister has told us that, if we manage to reach full agreement with the EU27, there will still be a limited role for the European Court of Justice, but we do not know what the dispute resolution procedure will be if we do not. Can he confirm whether it is still the Government’s position that the ECJ will have no jurisdiction in the event of bilateral agreements being necessary? I am not sure what incentive there will for other countries to agree to a brand new dispute resolution architecture, and I doubt very much that they would want to pay for one. It seems to me that, sooner or later, the Government will have to come clean with their own Back Benchers that, in this area at least, the ECJ will still have a role to play, even in the event of a no-deal scenario.

Even under the current arrangements, cost recovery is something that we do not appear to have handled satisfactorily and the fault for that lies with the Government alone. In 2012-13, the NHS charged only around 65% of what it could have done to visitors from outside the EEA and Switzerland, and only 16% to visitors from within that area. Although I accept that things have improved since then, they are still far from perfect.
Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston mentioned, the Public Accounts Committee said that it was chaotic.

The Law Society of Scotland was clear on the importance of this issue when it gave evidence to the Lords Committee. It said that

"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."

So the Government need to raise their game in terms of cost recovery. If there is an additional administrative burden on the NHS in setting up new systems of cost recovery because of agreements reached, will the Minister give a commitment that NHS providers will be adequately compensated?

Perhaps the issue of reciprocal healthcare matters most on the island of Ireland where the border area has a dispersed population of around 2 million people, with an integrated healthcare system that has to survive whatever the future arrangements end up being. They cannot be failed by this Bill, which is why we believe that there needs to be maximum parliamentary oversight.

This Bill is necessary, but it does seem that the Government have used the opportunity to give themselves powers far beyond those that are necessary to achieve the objective set out under this legislation. They are using every trick in the book to avoid proper scrutiny of their actions. That is part of a disturbing trend that we are seeing across much of the Brexit legislation. It is a trend that does the Government no credit and it is a trend that I believe Members from across the House will come to regret.

7.53 pm  

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I do not intend to detain the House for long. I support this Bill, but only regret that it is necessary. I wish to tell the House about an email that I received from a friend recently. He told me about his 92-year-old father who was visiting France and had a fall. He phoned my friend, who dialled 999 in this country, and an hour later his father was in hospital—all of that at no cost to his father because he carried a European health insurance card.

The close ties that we have involving our reciprocal healthcare are not just financial. They are also about those close links and data transfer. I profoundly regret that this is the kind of thing that people will not realise they have lost until it is gone. That is the great tragedy here. The point is that it is not people like us, who are relatively fit and healthy, who will necessarily lose out by having to spend an extra 10% to 20% on our health insurance costs; it is our constituents who are elderly, who have to have regular kidney dialysis or who have other complex medical conditions, who will simply find themselves uninsurable or having to face prohibitively expensive insurance costs, and who, if they run into difficulties while they are abroad, will find themselves really adrift.

I hope that the Minister will make it absolutely clear to our constituents that, 67 days from now—the chances are looking more likely that we could crash out with no deal—very, very many of our constituents will find themselves in a really dire situation should they fall into difficulties abroad. They need to be given clear and specific advice about their holiday plans. For those of our fellow citizens who have retired to the European Union and who find themselves in difficulties, I regret that this is a situation for which we will all have to take responsibility in years to come. I hope that the Government will rule out no deal because the consequences will be profound.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 2 to 10 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CANALS AND INLAND WATERWAYS)

That the draft Merchant Shipping and Other Transport (Environmental Protection) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 27 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (NUCLEAR SAFEGUARDS)

That the draft Nuclear Safeguards (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (PENSIONS)

That the draft Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 3 December, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (LEGAL PROFESSION)

That the draft Services of Lawyers and Lawyer’s Practice (Revocation etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 21 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (HEALTH AND SAFETY)

That the draft Justification Decision Power (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 23 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (TRADE MARKS)

That the draft Trade Marks (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 28 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (PATENTS)

That the draft Patents (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 28 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ROAD TRAFFIC)

That the draft Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 November, be approved.—(Jeremy Quin.)

Question agreed to.
COMMITTEES

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 11 and 12 together.

Ordered,

JUSTICE

That Alex Chalk be discharged from the Justice Committee and Robert Courts be added.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

That Neil O’Brien be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Mr Sam Gyimah be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Coty Site (Seaton Delaval)

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

7.56 pm

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): I held an Adjournment debate on this subject just over a year ago, when this factory closed. The factory was originally owned by Shulton. It made Old Spice aftershave, which anyone who is as old as me will remember. This was the company that made that product, and still made it until the factory’s closure. Of course, it went on to make Hugo Boss, which cost about 40 quid a bottle.

The factory closed under poor circumstances. There was a merger: Coty, an American company, had a 48% share and Proctor & Gamble a 52% share. A year after the merger, the factory closed. The company had factories in Spain, France and Germany. It also had a factory in Tipperary in Ireland, which closed along with ours. I believe that it also has one somewhere in Kent—in Ashford, I think.

The owners decided to close down the Seaton Delaval factory, which was making a good profit. Proctor & Gamble had invested £21 million in the new factory. We could not understand why they wanted to close it, until we looked into the deal and found that it was cheaper to sack British workers than it was to sack Spanish, German and French workers. It was down to the capitalist system—that was the way that it worked. The Americans wanted to take over the company and to get rid of some of the competition, and the cheapest one was, unfortunately, Seaton Delaval at that particular time. It was at least 20% more expensive to sack German workers and at least 7% more expensive to sack French workers.

The factory has been standing empty since it closed. I do not know whether it has deteriorated, but I am told that it is still in good shape. Heather Mills, who, as everyone will know, was married to Paul McCartney, is becoming a very decent and entrepreneurial businesswoman. She has already opened a couple of factories: one is in Seaton, producing vegan food. Vegan food might not be appetising to some of us in this Chamber, but it certainly is among the young people. From what I have heard, there are 3.5 million vegans in this country at this moment in time. Of course, that says a lot. Something is clearly going on here, because some of this food is pretty tasty. I have never tasted it, but my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) says that he has had one of Greggs’ sausages. I may never have tasted vegan food, but my granddaughter has. She buys it and says it is quite tasty now—not like it used to be in the old days, when it was horrible stuff. Now they put all sorts of spices in, and they do a good job.

Heather Mills wants to expand. She wants to use the Coty factory so that she can export—she has another factory making food for this country. The problem is that the owners are asking a lot of money for the Coty factory and the price is too high. She wants to invest a lot of money in it. The investment needed to get the factory up and running is about £4 million; after fitting it out with all the machinery, we are talking about £6 million. We can see that she needs a lot of money. I do not know what the owners are asking for the factory, but I know it is a lot.
We want to be careful here. I found out that Canada is investing $153 million in vegan food. Remember we have a trade agreement with Canada—well, Europe has. Canada wants to become a world leader in vegan food. If Heather Mills wants to outdo Canada, we need to help her with costs.

The last time I spoke about this here, the Minister who responded was someone who later resigned over Europe—I cannot think of his constituency.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): It could have been any of them.

Mr Campbell: Yes. He has gone, anyway.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I was in contact with the hon. Gentleman before the debate, and—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Shannon, I am sure that you have a direct link to the debate and that that is why you are here to help us.

Jim Shannon: Does the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) agree that the Government have the ability to intervene in such cases? An empty factory could open and therefore create jobs. There must be consideration of the local economy, and perhaps the Government could indirectly help the constituency.

I tried vegan sausage rolls in Westminster Hall’s Jubilee Room last week, and the taste convinced me. It was hard to tell between the vegan roll and a sausage roll; I had both, and that is my honest opinion—and I love sausage rolls.

Mr Ronnie Campbell: That is an example of why I will have to change my food habits. I do not know what the local Indian takeaway will do when I go in and ask for vegan food. I do not think it will work. I will have a try, anyway.

There were a lot of jobs in the factory when it was run by Coty and Procter & Gamble, and they were all lost—at least 500 permanent and a lot of part-time jobs. The part-time jobs went to local people—married women doing a little bit of extra work. Those jobs were not replaced, but I understand that most of the older men got redundancy. I am not saying it was a bad deal. They got a good redundancy package, and most of them went on to get a job—that was the last information I had. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) makes an important point about investment in places such as Seaton Delaval.

Let me repeat what the Government said the last time this was debated:

“The Government are supporting the economy of the north-east by providing £380 million of local growth funding and improving infrastructure, skills, innovation and transport. That funding will lever in £300 million of public and private investment, and will create about 8,000 jobs.”—[Official Report, 20 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 873.]

That was what I got the last time I was here, when the factory was closing. I am hoping that that is still on the table, and that the Minister can at least give some indication of whether we can help Heather Mills’ VBites—that is the name of the company, and Heather is its leading light. The jobs would be very important for this part of the world, with so many having been lost there.

Ian Lavery: Will my hon. Friend briefly explain how many jobs could be created, and what that would mean for the economy of south-east Northumberland?

Mr Campbell: I am told that the main factory, which is good and has been invested in, would provide from 500 to more than 600 jobs for those preparing the food. As a knock-on, the rest of the factory would be made into start-up businesses. There are five or six small areas for start-up businesses, which is a good idea. I am told that if it takes off, we are talking about over 1,000 jobs. We should think about that venture, because vegan food is taking off. I am delighted to hear about vegan sausages; I must try them, seeing that everybody else has. I must try vegan food—I am sure I will one of these days—but I do not think the Indian restaurant has vegan chefs; that is the problem.

Seaton Delaval went through a bad patch last year when it lost all those jobs, especially the part-time ones. It wants them back. I drive past the factory often, and it is a shame to see that nice factory, which has had a lot of investment put into it, standing empty. I would like to see the Government giving a bit of encouragement and help. If their statement from my previous debate means anything, they should help.

8.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It is a great privilege to appear before you this evening, Mr Deputy Speaker. You will not be able to get a sausage roll, vegan or not, between the ambition that the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) has for his constituency, and my ambition for the area. I will self-declare: I am not taking part in Vegamuary, and I am not a vegangeli— the vegan equivalent of an evangelist—but I have tried a Greggs vegan sausage roll. It tasted to me much like any other Greggs sausage roll: not very nice.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on an important subject for his constituents. As he mentioned, it is not the first time he has done so: he brought it to the House in 2017. When a factory closes after 50 years at the heart of a community, all our thoughts should be with the people who worked there. I am very pleased to hear from the hon. Gentleman that many—96%, according to our measure—of those who worked in the factory have obtained new employment. Mr Deputy Speaker, you, like me, represent a manufacturing area. You will know that many people who work in manufacturing plants are concerned when they hear about redundancies, which affect not just them, but their family, their mortgage, their children, and all their hopes and ambitions for the future.

I understand that the hon. Member for Blyth Valley was absolutely instrumental in putting together the local response group when the redundancies were first known about.

Mr Ronnie Campbell: And the county council.

Jake Berry: The hon. Gentleman worked with the local authority, the county council, my Department, the Department for Work and Pensions and other Government agencies. I am informed that following the sterling work of the hon. Gentleman and others, 96% of former employees of the factory said that their transition from
their former workplace was a success. However, that is not in any way to downplay the stress and disruption that families faced.

Turning to the future of the site, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, it was the place where Old Spice was manufactured. Its advertising slogan was, from memory, “The mark of a man”, but they also had this rather wonderful slogan on their bottle: “If your grandfather hadn’t worn it, you wouldn’t exist.” That shows that the advertising campaigns of the 1970s were slightly different from today’s. Thinking about the 1970s, beards are back in fashion, and apparently nationalisation is back in fashion in some parts of the House. Socialism is also back in fashion, allegedly, but not with my constituents. Perhaps Old Spice is due a comeback.

The hon. Gentleman is right that it is extremely important that this site remains vacant. He brings new information to me and to my Department about the interest of Heather Mills in acquiring the site for one of the exciting new businesses of the future—providing vegan food. I will certainly agree to go away with my team and make contact with Heather Mills. I must admit, as someone from Liverpool, that I was on the other side regarding the divorce, but I do know that through that divorce she obtained £24 million from Sir Paul McCartney, and she requires £10 million to deliver on her factory. All that aside, it is a new opportunity for the site and to create the desperately needed, secure, highly paid jobs that for me, as the northern powerhouse Minister, are about delivering the northern powerhouse.

As for the money going into the north-east, since the hon. Gentleman’s last debate we have seen the successful conclusion of the north of Tyne devolution deal. I worked very closely with people on a cross-party basis to secure what I am certain is a hugely exciting opportunity for the boroughs north of the Tyne that, across the lifetime of the deal, will see £600 million invested in the area. That is information new to this debate. I hope that he will reach out to the Mayor, Norman Redfearn, who was appointed temporarily until elections next May. The fact that no one has yet been elected should not discourage the hon. Gentleman from talking to the north of Tyne boroughs and the combined authority about ways in which they can lever in some of the £600 million—£20 million a year—that they are going to receive as part of this exciting deal.

Talking about economic renaissance, particularly of our manufacturing, the hon. Gentleman should look for inspiration—quite a long way down the road, but down the road none the less—at the work Ben Houchen is doing as the Mayor of Tees Valley. Like all the best people seeking to drive the northern powerhouse forward, he is working across political lines. He has been successful in setting up the first mayoral development corporation outside London for decades. On a recent visit to the SSI site, which many people would know as the former Redcar steelworks, I was pleased to announce £14 million of additional funding, which is part of the regeneration and redevelopment of that site, creating the highly paid, secure jobs that we all want to see in the northern powerhouse.

The hon. Gentleman talked briefly about the contribution that the LEP could make. He will be aware that £3.4 billion has already been invested across the north of England as part of the growth deals, with £379.6 million going into the north-east. The north-east has one of the highest performing LEPs. That is why—it is almost a victim of its own success—all of that £379 million is currently committed. That does not mean that if projects are underspent or do not proceed there will not be an opportunity to talk to the LEP about redirecting any underspends from the existing money. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman says that he has a meeting with the LEP. I encourage him to use that meeting to see whether that is possible.

In general, I believe that we are in a golden period for investment in the north-east. It is a hugely exciting time, with a Mayor in Tees Valley and a Mayor north of the Tyne. I hope that regardless of our political allegiances, we can lay aside our differences and say that our mission here in the House of Commons is to ensure that people across the north of England—north-east, north-west, Yorkshire and the Humber—benefit from the Government’s plan, the northern powerhouse. In one sentence, that is a plan to create better education, and better social and economic outcomes, across the north of England, so that no other generation will believe that their best hope and opportunity lie in getting the train to London, but can stay in the north of England, which all of us in the Chamber, virtually, have the privilege of knowing is the best place in this country to have the privilege of living.

Question put and agreed to.

8.14 pm
House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Human Rights

1. Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the safety and security of human rights defenders throughout the world. [908694]

21. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to promote and support human rights internationally. [908714]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The UK is committed to the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide and supports the work of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, the High Commission for Human Rights and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The UK is one of the longest-standing members of the Human Rights Council, as the right hon. Gentleman will be aware. Regrettably, human rights defenders face unprecedented attack in many parts of the world. In 2018 alone, more than 300 such defenders were killed, and thousands more were imprisoned, attacked or tortured around the world.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. There has been a surge of attacks against and repression of human rights defenders around the world. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women’s rights activists, including Samar Badawi, have been detained since last May, and there have been reports that some have been tortured. I welcome Lord Ahmad’s announcement last month that the Department will publish the guidelines for embassies about support for human rights defenders, to aid clarity and consistency. When does the Minister envisage that publication taking place?

Mark Field: I do not want to put my ministerial colleague under undue pressure, but this is clearly something that we consider a major priority. Obviously, as Ministers we raise human rights issues with all our overseas counterparts, in both public and private forums. In December, as part of the UK’s commitment to freedom of religious belief, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who is sitting to my right, announced an independent global review of the persecution of Christians, which will contain recommendations on practical steps in respect of that persecution. Of course, that applies to religious beliefs of all sorts.

Lilian Greenwood: An estimated 1 million Uighur Muslims are being held in detention camps in Xinjiang by the Chinese Government. In the very week that we commit to relearning the lessons of the holocaust, does the Minister share my concern that such human rights abuses and persecution cannot go unchallenged? It is quite disgraceful conduct from a permanent member of the Security Council. What is the Minister doing to protest to the Chinese Government about these issues?

Mark Field: May I address this issue up front? I suspect that many Members from all parties have grave concerns about it. We are concerned about what is happening in Xinjiang province, including the detention of, as the hon. Lady says, more than 1 million people without trial in political re-education camps. Not only did British diplomats on the ground visit Xinjiang in December 2018 but we are raising and will continue to raise this issue bilaterally with the Chinese. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary did so most recently in Beijing in the autumn.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Human rights defenders face particular challenges in the Gaza strip, which is controlled by Hamas. Journalists are oppressed, demonstrations are violently put down and public executions take place. What are we doing to support human rights defenders in the Gaza strip?

Mark Field: I reassure my hon. Friend that Ministers, particularly my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East, do make clear our concerns about the rights of human rights defenders and the importance of their work in every part of the world.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Brave human rights defenders are alerting us to a terrible new wave of persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Chechnya. What steps will the Government take to remind the Russian authorities of their responsibilities, including publishing an independent inquiry into this issue? They are signatories to the European convention on human rights and these abuses cannot be allowed to continue.

Mark Field: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are and remain deeply concerned by the recent reports of the renewed wave of persecution of LGBT folk in Chechnya. Both the Foreign Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the Americas have in the past week made it clear to their Russian counterparts that we must stop such persecution and hold those responsible to account.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions about the human rights situation have Ministers had with the Government of Colombia, either directly or through the embassies, following the bombing of the police academy in that country?
Alistair Burt: That is absolutely right. The future of Iraq, which has real possibilities now following the elections some months ago, has to be built not only on the understanding that all communities in Iraq need a share in government and in the development of the country but on human rights, which can be exploited if they are abused. That forms a fundamental part of the future of Iraq. These issues are indeed raised.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): A successful economy is vital to secure Iraq's long-term future and the wellbeing of its people, who have suffered so much. What steps are being taken to ensure that British companies can participate in building that better future?

Alistair Burt: We have an active and thriving Iraq-UK business council. Baroness Nicholson has been involved for many years in efforts in this area, particularly in the south of the country in Basra. The contracts and opportunities for the rebuilding and the reconstruction of Iraq will be much helped by the international community’s determination to support Iraq and Iraq’s own use of its oil revenues. British companies should be well placed because of their history and expertise.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What dialogue has the Minister had with the Government of Iraq on the rights of Kurdish Iraqis and Kurds across the region?

Alistair Burt: The Kurdish community is represented through the Kurdish Regional Government, and we keep in regular contact with them. Relationships between Baghdad and Irbil are vital for ensuring that the Kurdish community feels a part of a united Iraq. Those relations, I think, have been strengthened since the election of President Barham Salih, but the Kurdish people’s future in a united Iraq is fundamental to the future and progress of a united Iraq.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The Government are supposed to provide the House with an update on the campaign against Daesh every quarter. The last I checked, the duration of a quarter is 92 days, but the most recent Daesh statement was more than 200 days ago, so when will we get the next update, or has the policy changed?

Alistair Burt: No, the policy has not changed. The short answer is soon, of course.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Soon?

Alistair Burt: Yes, soon. It seems the best possible word to use. The definition of quarter has obviously stretched a little bit too far, but it is important both to keep up the relationship with the House on this and to confirm progress in relation to Daesh across Syria and Iraq, which continues to be vital.

Leaving the EU: Diplomatic Co-operation

3. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What assessment has the Minister made of the effect on diplomatic co-operation between the UK and the EU of the UK leaving the EU on 29 March 2019.

[908696]
The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Diplomatic co-operation with our partners in the EU over a wide range of areas is excellent, and will continue to be so post Brexit.

Drew Hendry: The Secretary of State says that, but the effects of a lack of co-operation are being felt directly in my constituency. A major European car manufacturer was due to invite 40 international journalists per day to a new Inverness hotel. Now the owner, Tony Storey, tells me that that has been cancelled, costing him £400,000 and priceless exposure for the highlands. What does the Secretary of State say to business owners like Tony and others who are being affected by this Brexit shambles?

Mr Hunt: If SNP Members want to resolve the uncertainty, it is very simple—vote for the deal that the Prime Minister has negotiated.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): It is possible to welcome yesterday’s announcement of the waiving of the settled status fee, which has gone down very well with EU nationals across the UK, including in Chelsea and Fulham, where I have 11,000 EU nationals. Could my right hon. Friend say something about improving our representation in Germany every single week, so we do give it the highest priority in our foreign relations, and will continue to do so post Brexit. However, I will look into the issue of consulates that my right hon. Friend raises.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the Foreign Secretary has picked up the fact that morale in the diplomatic corps across Europe is at rock bottom. What will he do to lift the spirits of a corps of professional diplomats who are so disturbed by the lack of leadership from this Government on Europe?

Mr Hunt: I defer to my right hon. Friend’s knowledge of Germany, which is second to none. I would like to reassure him that over the past three years we have had, on average, about one Government Minister visiting Germany every single week, so we do give it the highest priority in our foreign relations, and will continue to do so post Brexit. However, I will look into the issue of consulates that my right hon. Friend raises.

Mr Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Recently, the former US Secretary of State, John Kerry, remarked on the fact that the British Government are working closely with other European Governments on the Iran nuclear deal. Could the Foreign Secretary give the House further detail on how that will continue after we leave the European Union on 29 March?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. We have an independent foreign policy now and we will continue, obviously, to have that post Brexit. The Iran nuclear deal was negotiated with the United States and European countries, and has been successful in preventing Iran developing a nuclear programme. It is not perfect, but it has worked, and that is why we continue to support it and work closely with our partners to do so.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I am sure all Members will want to join me in congratulating the Dáil in Ireland, which yesterday marked the centenary of its first international address and its message to free nations. Ireland, like every other EU member state, sees the EU as a way of strengthening its independence and sovereignty and increasing its diplomatic clout. Shinzo Abe has called on us to take no deal off the table. The Secretary of State knows the deal will not go through. Can he at least take no deal off the table? No deal would undermine our diplomatic clout.

Mr Hunt: The best way to avoid no deal is to find a deal that can pass through this House. If you take no deal off the table, you remove any incentive for the EU to help us do that, which is why it would be a big mistake and actually make no deal more likely.

Stephen Gethins: The Foreign Secretary is wrong. If we take no deal off the table, we can talk in a meaningful way with each other and with our European partners.

On 17 January I received a written answer from the Minister for Europe and the Americas, saying that we have 550 officials working on Brexit—hundreds of officials, working on a worse deal for the UK. At a time when the FCO and the public services are struggling for resources, is that not a waste of time, a waste of finances and a waste of the good will that we desperately need at this time in terms of our diplomacy?

Mr Hunt: What makes no deal more likely is if parties like the hon. Gentleman’s continue to vote against sensible proposals that this Government bring to the House of Commons. Any Government have to be responsible and prepare for all eventualities, but the best way to make sure that we do not have that eventuality is to do the preparation.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I take the Foreign Secretary back to our last debate on Brexit? He gave me an answer that was not exactly convincing, so I thought I would give him another chance. [Interruption.] I am nothing but kindness—it is my new year’s resolution. Four days after the referendum, he said that “we need to negotiate a deal and put it to the British people, either in a referendum or through the Conservative manifesto at a fresh general election...we will trust the British people to decide on whether or not it is a good deal.”

So can I ask him again why he no longer believes in trusting the British people to decide whether they want the Prime Minister’s deal?

Mr Hunt: I do. We have had a general election and over 80% of voters supported parties that wanted to leave the EU and end free movement. I will happily take criticisms of our Brexit policy on the chin the moment Labour actually has the courage to have its own Brexit
policy in the first place. This morning, the shadow Business Secretary, on the “Today” programme, could not even say whether Labour supported a second referendum or not. That is not policy—it is politics. I simply say to the right hon. Lady that to play politics with Brexit in a hung Parliament is a total betrayal of ordinary voters.

Emily Thornberry: Well, that is not a very convincing answer, is it? It is the same sort of unconvincing answer that we got last time. We always know when Government Ministers are getting a bit desperate when they decide that they need to ask the Opposition what their policy is instead.

The Foreign Secretary said in the very first paragraph of the article that I am quoting that “we did not vote on the terms of our departure.”

So his entire argument was that we should trust the people to decide the terms on which we would leave. But let me also remind him that in the same article he warned of the danger that “we could be thrown out with no deal at all.”

So even if he no longer believes that the public should have a say on the final terms of a deal, does he still at least believe that they should have a say if we are risking leaving with no deal at all?

Mr Hunt: If the right hon. Lady is worried about no deal, there is a very easy way to stop it, and that is to talk to the Prime Minister. The Leader of the Opposition talks without preconditions to Hamas, Hezbollah and the IRA, but not to the British Prime Minister. The reason is that Labour’s objective is not to have a deal but to have a crisis—and what a betrayal of ordinary families that is.

Catalonia

4. Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the political situation in Catalonia. [908697]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): As I have made clear to the House previously, the situation in Catalonia is a matter for Spain. The UK strongly supports the rule of law and is of the view that questions related to the issue of Catalan independence should be resolved within the proper constitutional and legal channels of Spain.

Ronnie Cowan: Carme Forcadell was the presiding officer in the Catalan Parliament—a position we would call “the Speaker”. Carme has been in prison without trial for over nine months because she facilitated a debate in a debating chamber. When she is tried, she faces over 16 years in prison. When will the UK Government condemn this outrage and stand up for the process of democracy?

Sir Alan Duncan: This is a matter for the Spanish courts. Every democracy has its own rules, laws and procedures. We fully support the proper implementation of the rule of law in Spain, and it is not for us to interfere in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In any discussions that the Government might have with the Spanish Government, and indeed Governments across the EU, would the Minister be assured that each of those Governments are respectful of the national economic and political integrity of sovereign states across Europe?

Sir Alan Duncan: I share the hon. Gentleman’s view and am very grateful to him for expressing it so clearly, so cogently and so sensibly.

Mr Speaker: I just very gently say to the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan): do not give the Government any ideas.

Afghanistan

5. Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What diplomatic steps the Government are taking to help ensure the safety of the Hazara community in Afghanistan. [908698]

18. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the political and security situation in Afghanistan. [908711]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The UK remains committed to ensuring that the Afghan national defence and security forces improve their capability to protect all ethnic and religious groups in Afghanistan. British embassy officials regularly meet Hazara representatives to hear their specific concerns at first hand. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, there have been positive recent developments in Afghanistan’s political and security situation, but the ongoing conflict means that significant challenges remain.

Mr Bailey: I thank the Minister for his reply. The Hazara community in Afghanistan is increasingly being targeted by not only the Taliban in Afghanistan, but Daesh infiltrating from Pakistan. What steps are the Government taking to talk to the Governments of both Pakistan and Afghanistan about stopping at source the violent approach from ISIS and other military groups?

Mark Field: I very much accept what the hon. Gentleman says. We work closely with our counterparts in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Peace efforts must focus on supporting attempts to start a credible process. To that end, we will work closely with partners—in particular, US Special Representative Khalilzad—to ensure that international forces that are a factor in the conflict properly address the issue.

Jessica Morden: In view of the ongoing security situation, will Ministers do more with Defence and Home Office Ministers to ensure that Afghan interpreters who came here alone under the redundancy scheme can be reunited here with their wives and families, as they clearly face great danger in Afghanistan?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right; local staff, including interpreters, continue to play a vital role in supporting the objectives of the UK and our partners in Afghanistan. As well as paying generous redundancy packages in recognition of service,
we will do our level best for those who have made such sacrifices on our behalf, and I will write to my counterparts in the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence to ensure that we do so.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I pay tribute to the work of the Foreign Office in Pakistan and particularly our high commissioner, Tom Drew. Will the Foreign Secretary lend all his support to the work that Tom is doing alongside Khalilzad on peace negotiations in Afghanistan, particularly to protect the Hazara population but also to stop foreign actors playing silly and dangerous games in Afghanistan, which we have seen for far too long?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his wise words. He knows this issue well. We are lucky to have such a high-calibre high commissioner in Pakistan in Tom Drew, who is coming to the end of his time there, and in Sir Nicholas Kay and Giles Lever, the chargé d’affaires in Kabul. We have the highest calibre of trusted diplomats, who make a tremendous contribution not only to UK interests but to the interests of civilians in both countries.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What discussions has the Minister had with his American counterpart about US plans to reduce by half the number of troops in Afghanistan? Does he share my concern that that announcement might encourage the Taliban to play for time, rather than engage in meaningful peace talks with the Afghan Government?

Mark Field: That is always an issue. After the White House statement on 28 December that the President had not decided to draw down the US military presence in Afghanistan, we want to try to náil this issue down. Our collective long-term commitment to the objective remains unchanged. We have a long-term intention that NATO and its partners should not reduce their military presence unless conditions on the ground change.

**US Trade Restrictions on Cuba**

6. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his US counterpart on lifting US trade restrictions on Cuba. [908699]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): As we have said on many occasions, we consider the US embargo to be counterproductive, and we oppose any possible tightening of it in the future. US sanctions and other unilateral Administrative and judicial measures do the opposite of encouraging potential reforms and economic progress, and officials in London and the British embassy in Havana regularly raise our objections to trade restrictions on Cuba with our US counterparts.

David T. C. Davies: Free markets and free trade always encourage political freedoms, and therefore I urge the Minister to continue doing everything possible to remind the United States of its commitment to free trade around the world and the importance of that in encouraging freedom and democracy.

Sir Alan Duncan: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. We consistently vote in support of UN resolutions to end the US-imposed embargo, but we do more than that because, under the UK Protection of Trading Interests Act 1980, it is illegal for UK companies to comply with extraterritorial legislation such as the US embargo. We continue to work together with our EU partners to provide UK companies with the support they need to be able to trade with Cuba.

**Syria**

7. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent diplomatic steps he has taken to secure a resolution to the conflict in Syria. [908700]

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): The Government support and keep in close contact with the UN-led political process to end the Syrian conflict. We have used our relationships and convening power to encourage progress, including by hosting the then UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura and the Syria small group of like-minded countries. We are also engaging with the new UN envoy, Geir Pedersen, who has our full support.

Jeff Smith: Given the sensitivity at the Syria-Turkey border, what specific steps can we take to keep the US engaged in diplomatic solutions, if it is going to withdraw troops, and, crucially, to keep Turkey engaged in finding a diplomatic solution that does not involve attacking the Kurdish forces?

Alistair Burt: I think both states are extremely conscious of the impact of any of their decisions on Syria. We have engaged regularly with the United States as it works through its process of withdrawal to make sure it is manageable and to make sure that everyone remains focused on the importance of continuing the global coalition against Daesh. That contact is constant with Turkey and with the United States.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend condemn the role in Syria of Iran, a regime that is terrorising its people at home and many across the region, including in Syria?

Alistair Burt: The actions of Iran in supporting the Assad regime and the way in which it has conducted a civil war against its own people have caused deep concern. Iran can improve its position only if it does not support such a regime and if it encourages a full part in the political process to see a reformed Syria.

19. [908712] Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): A stable Lebanon is vital to securing a resolution to the conflict in Syria. I have just returned from Lebanon with Aid to the Church in Need, and we saw there that Lebanon is a country barely able to cope with the pressure it is under, having been without a Government for the past eight months. What has been done to ensure, while a Government are being found, that Lebanon remains stable and secure?

Alistair Burt: I met the Prime Minister of Lebanon, as did my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, on his visit to the United Kingdom.1 We work very closely with all parties in Lebanon to encourage the process of Government formation. We are acutely conscious of the pressure of 1.3 million refugees in Lebanon. We

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would encourage the return of refugees from Lebanon to Syria, but only when it is safe to do so. Support for Lebanon and its economy is a fundamental part of the United Kingdom’s engagement in the region.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Minister will be aware that countries across the Arab Gulf are now reopening their embassies in Damascus. What work is the Minister doing with some of our Arab allies and partners to do more to get back to rebuilding and to getting peace and consensus across Syria?

Alistair Burt: There seems to be a mixed view among Arab states about normalising relations with Syria, and that is certainly not the view of all states. Arab states are understandably worried about the influence of others in Syria, but there is a recognition—certainly by the United Kingdom, the EU and others—that there can be no normalisation of relationships and no return to embassies unless there is clear evidence that the regime in Syria has learned from the terrible costs it has inflicted on the Syrian people and there is a political settlement to demonstrate that.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Given the huge shifts in policy on Syria emerging from the United States Administration, will the Minister provide some clarity on three related issues: when US troops will be withdrawn, what the preconditions are for that to happen and how America’s Kurdish allies will be protected after that withdrawal?

Mr Speaker: Cheeky—three questions, but there is not time for three answers.

Alistair Burt: With respect, Mr Speaker, they were good questions all. It is clear that the United States has made a serious appraisal of the impact of its troop withdrawal so as not to affect the coalition against Daesh, and it is in close contact with its neighbours. We do not know the precise details. It is important that this does not disturb the work against Daesh, but the United States has also made it clear, as have others, that the Kurdish community must not be affected by any untoward incursion by Turkey or any others. It is important that the stability of north-east Syria is not affected by American decisions.

Registers of Beneficial Ownership of Companies

8. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What recent discussions the Government have had with authorities in the (a) overseas territories and (b) Crown dependencies on establishing public registers of the beneficial ownership of companies.

Sir Alan Duncan: As required by the 2018 Act, we will prepare draft legislation by the end of 2020. All the overseas territories are expected to have fully functioning public registers in place by the end of 2023, as my hon. Friend says, as part of the Government’s call for all countries to make such registers the global norm by that date. The plan is to make 2023 consistent for both.

Sir Alan Duncan: We will stick by the timing, but I think that a lot of work has already been done so that they could perhaps be in place before that date. I am confident that progress is being made as we would wish.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Over and over again the Government have let the overseas territories off the hook. Now the Government are saying that the territories do not need to have public registers of beneficial ownership until 2023—at a cost, incidentally, of £50 billion to the British taxpayer. The law we passed last May required the Government to act in 2020. Does that not take the Government’s contempt for Parliament to a new low?

Sir Alan Duncan: No. I share the hon. Lady’s view that overseas territories with financial centres should meet international standards on tax transparency and anti-money laundering, but most overseas territories are either being evaluated or due to be evaluated by the financial action taskforce and are working to deliver their commitments made to the European Commission to prevent them from being included on the EU’s list of non-co-operative tax jurisdictions.

Israel and Palestine

9. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of renewed rocket fire from Gaza into Israel on the political and security situation in that region.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): From the vantage point of having introduced the original public register, may I ask the Minister whether he agrees that it is utterly intolerable that British territories and dependencies should be used as a covert conduit for British tax dodgers, and that if they will not reform we should resort to the sanction of direct rule?

Sir Alan Duncan: What recent steps he has taken to help secure a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to help secure a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Rocket fire and attacks on Israel from Gaza remain unacceptable and damaging to any prospect of eventual peace. We continue to urge Israel and the Palestinian Authority to resume direct negotiations towards a two-state solution, and we remain in regular contact with many parties on this important issue.
Nigel Huddleston: Last year more than 800 rockets and mortars were fired from Gaza into communities in Israel. Does the Minister agree that we must not forget that Gaza is run by Hamas, who are not our friends but an internationally proscribed terrorist organisation? Will he update the House on what help we are providing to Israel in its fight against terrorism?

Alistair Burt: We never forget that Gaza is under the control of Hamas, and that other military groups operate there. As long as there are terrorist attacks on Israel from Gaza, the situation will remain impossible to resolve. We will continue to support very strongly the right of Israel to defend itself.

Julie Elliott: What is the Government’s assessment of the report by the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs about the rise in Israeli attempts to delegitimise human rights organisations operating in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, particularly humanitarian non-governmental organisations, and the negative impact that that has on their ability to represent Palestinian rights and organisations?

Alistair Burt: Israel, as a democracy in the middle east, has always prided itself on ensuring that those groups have the freedom to operate there, even if they challenge the Israeli Government. It is very important to the United Kingdom that that tradition is maintained, particularly at a time of crisis. The west bank needs those who are able to interpret the situation and speak honestly, both to the Palestinian Authority and to the state of Israel, and the more political space there is to do that, the better it will be all round for the prospects of peace.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the effect of the tunnel construction into Israel by Hamas?

Alistair Burt: The recent discovery of tunnels from Lebanon into Israel has caused much concern. It is important that they are dealt with on both sides of the border. There is no reason for that work to continue, either by Hamas in the south in Gaza or by Hezbollah in the north in Lebanon.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that Malaysia’s decision to ban Israeli athletes from participating in Malaysian sporting events is shameful and that such attempts to single out the world’s only Jewish state come from a place of deep prejudice does nothing to advance the cause of peace?

Alistair Burt: The United Kingdom does not agree with this decision of the Malaysian Government. It does nothing to assist the worldwide recognition of Paralympians. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Asia and the Pacific will take that up directly.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) on materials that are sent to Gaza for building homes, but are being diverted to build terror tunnels, what action is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that our aid is used to build homes for people in Gaza rather than terror tunnels?

Alistair Burt: The principal control of materials flowing into Gaza is of course exercised by the Israelis, with their concerns about dual-use material. We are in regular contact with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency to make every attempt to ensure that such materials are not diverted. Ultimately, there is no future for Hamas and for Gaza unless they stop the terror tactics and the diversion of materials, and respond to the Quartet principles and make peace.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): In the past year, 186 Palestinian civilians have been killed on the Gaza border and no Israelis. More than 23,000 Palestinian civilians and 16 Israelis have been injured. Should not the focus be on ending the blockade of Gaza and, indeed, the occupation that has gone on since 1967?

Alistair Burt: Virtually every statistic from the area cries out for the need to resolve this issue. We have spoken about it in this House for decades. There are arguments and counter-arguments, but in the main, the misery continues, either for those who feel under attack from terrorist sources or for those who feel the humanitarian impact of political decisions made elsewhere. That is why the United Kingdom is so wedded to—and determined to see—a middle east peace process for all.

Yemen

10. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent diplomatic steps he has taken to help secure a resolution to the conflict in Yemen.

Alistair Burt: Last Wednesday, the UN Security Council passed resolution 2452, which establishes a six-month, 75-strong UN mission to monitor the ceasefire in Hodeidah. We obviously wish it every success.

Liz Twist: One of the fears about the Swedish agreement and the accompanying UN resolution was that they were too limited in scope and too loose in enforcing compliance. Does the Secretary of State accept that those fears are being realised? Is it not time to consider a broader and more robust UN resolution?

Mr Hunt: I understand the hon. Lady’s concerns. I simply say that we wanted to establish a ceasefire—this is the first time that has happened in four years of conflict—and then move on to the next stage, which is a second set of peace talks where we can agree a political settlement. There have been some worrying signs—there have been attacks on both sides—but I was in touch with Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy yesterday, and broadly the ceasefire is holding. The key thing is to open the road from Sana’a to Hodeidah so that World Food Programme food can be released to the population.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): What recent diplomatic steps he has taken to help secure a resolution to the conflict in Yemen.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Last Wednesday, the UN Security Council passed resolution 2452, which establishes a six-month, 75-strong UN mission to monitor the ceasefire in Hodeidah. We obviously wish it every success.

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Ruth George: In the coming weeks, both Houses of Congress are due to vote on whether the US should continue its support for the Saudi coalition in Yemen. Both are expected to vote that it should not. Will the
Government give this House the same opportunity to vote on whether the UK should maintain our support for the war if it continues?

Mr Hunt: This House has shown recently its high ability to have votes on anything and everything it wishes to, so I am sure that there are plenty of opportunities to have votes on that. However, to answer directly in response to the point that the hon. Lady makes, Lady is making, breaking off support for the Saudi-Emirati coalition would reduce our influence with those two countries. At the moment, the ceasefire is broadly holding because those two countries are playing ball, and we would not want to change that.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for what he said before Christmas about my constituent Jackie Morgan’s daughter, Safia, who was kidnapped from Cardiff and taken to Yemen in the ’80s. I am glad to report to the House that she, her family and her husband, who are now in Cairo, have been granted the visas to travel to the UK, I hope tomorrow. Will the Foreign Secretary pass on my thanks to the Minister for the Middle East for the efforts that he has made to help in this case?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister and all the Foreign Office staff involved in that work.

UN Aid to Palestinian Refugees

11. Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure the long-term sustainability of UN aid to Palestinian refugees. [908704]

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): The UN Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA, is a necessary humanitarian and stabilising presence in the region, providing vital services to millions of Palestinian refugees every day. We have increased our funding to UNRWA, providing £65.5 million in 2018.

Marsha De Cordova: On 9 January, the Minister said: “Work is going on to ensure that, in the long term, UNRWA is sustainable.”—[Official Report, 9 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 349.] However, UNRWA is already closing health centres, and doubling and trebling shifts at schools to cut costs. If it closes down, what will happen to the 526,000 children in UNRWA schools and the 3.1 million patients of UNRWA health services? Can the Minister set out exactly what is going on?

Alistair Burt: We sought to increase our funding, as I mentioned to the hon. Lady, but we also talk to other donors. It is impossible for the United Kingdom to fill the gap created, but the point she makes is extremely pertinent: if the education of those in Gaza and children of Palestinian refugees stops, I wonder what organisation in the region would like to take over the education of impressionable youngsters.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Ongoing humanitarian support for Palestinians is vital but, given the track record of Hamas in seeking to abuse and exploit UNRWA, what assurances will the Minister give about protecting the independence and integrity of UNRWA and ensuring that taxpayers’ money is used to good effect?

Alistair Burt: I hear my right hon. Friend, but it is really important for the House to be clear that UNRWA is an independent organisation run by the UN. Of course practical pressures are caused in Gaza, because Gaza is run by Hamas, but it is wrong to suggest that UNRWA is in hock to anyone else but those who contribute as donors. It does vital work—health, education and services—and it is essential that that continues, because if UNRWA does not do it—I ask the House—who would step in to provide support, where would the finances come from and what would be done with them?

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the announcement by the Israeli authorities that they plan to close UNRWA schools in East Jerusalem is a direct attack on the welfare of Palestinian refugees in two refugee camps there, including 3,000 students? I welcome the Minister’s increased funding for UNRWA, but will he commit to support the renewal of UNRWA’s mandate later this year?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; he knows the area very well. Of course we will continue to support UNRWA, and look hard at the mandate renewal. It is important that it continues its work there because, as I have said, there is concern about what the impact will be if that work is not done. As I said earlier, all this tells us that such disputes and concerns will not change unless there is overall agreement on a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Unless that is done, these problems will continue to occur, much to the misery of all involved.

Soft Power

12. Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): What steps he is taking to co-ordinate the use of soft power in British foreign policy. [908705]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): According to the Portland Soft Power 30 index, the UK is the world’s leading international soft power country. Post Brexit, this will be a vital asset for us to continue to exploit.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I thank my right hon. Friend for that important answer, but does he agree that, like so many things that we do well in this country, we tend to take that for granted? Will he therefore assure this House that he will pay greater attention to the co-ordination of soft power across all Departments?

Mr Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that very important point. I can reassure him that I have presented to Cabinet on the subject of soft power and written to every head of mission across the world to underline its importance and to ask what they are doing about it. I am also in charge of a cross-Government taskforce aimed at making sure we do everything we can in this area.
Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Soft power can be very effective in places where we have a traditional connection, such as Cameroon. Constituents have recently visited me concerned about the ongoing human rights crisis there. Will a Minister meet me and my campaigners to see what more we can do?

Mr Hunt: The Minister for Africa is not here, but I am delighted to say in her absence that she would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman.

20. [908713] Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Soft power in the form of trade can lift billions of people out of poverty. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the opportunity of new trade deals with the Commonwealth, which would give those countries an opportunity to prosper, is one that we should pursue?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree. Just as vital is the UK’s support for the international trading system and our belief in free trade, which we continue to champion.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): African visitor visas are refused at over twice the average rate, and this has a negative impact on all aspects of soft power, including trade, business, culture, education and academia. This afternoon, the all-party parliamentary group on Africa, which I chair, is holding an open meeting on African visa refusals. Can I tell the meeting that the Foreign Secretary is speaking to his Home Office colleagues about the negative impact that this broken system is having?

Mr Hunt: I understand the hon. Lady’s concerns. If she writes to me following this afternoon’s meeting, I will happily pass them on to the Home Secretary.

Climate Change: International Co-operation

13. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made on the progress of international co-operation on climate change. [908706]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Lucky 13 for the right hon. Gentleman! The agreement of the rulebook for the Paris agreement at the 24th conference of the parties in Katowice in Poland last month, which I attended, was a crucial step forward, but all our assessments confirm that the current level of global ambition is not enough to meet the Paris goals of just over three years ago. We need unprecedented and rapid action to reduce emissions and build resilience.

David Hanson: I concur with the Minister. For all those reasons, will he ensure that, if the President of the United States visits this country in July, climate change will be central so that we can put it on the agenda of America, which is the power best able to influence world opinion on this issue?

Mark Field: I very much hope so. I was at the climate change summit in San Francisco in September, and interestingly it is not just the state of California but other US states that take this very seriously. There is, then, a lot of pressure from within the US, but obviously we will keep up that pressure in every way we can, both bilaterally and in multilateral forums.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: We are over time, but we cannot proceed without hearing from the hon. Lady.

Jo Swinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does the Minister agree that climate change is a strategic threat to our prosperity and security? If so, why is it no longer mentioned in the 28 objectives in his departmental plan?

Mark Field: It is very much an important part of my own plan. As the hon. Lady will appreciate, I attended last year’s meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum in Nauru and will attend the next one in Tuvalu—these issues are existential for many of those Pacific islands. I am sorry she feels that we are not giving this enough attention. I am proud of the work the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is doing with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which lead on this issue; we work very closely together in a range of different forums and will continue to do so.

Topical Questions

T1. [908719] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): My colleague the Minister for Africa is not with us today, as she is meeting partners from the African Union. At that meeting, she will be underlining our concern about the issues in Zimbabwe, where we have seen widespread unrest and a heavy security force response over the last week. Yesterday, I called on President Mnangagwa not to turn back the clock. People must have the right to peaceful protest without fear of violence.

Alan Brown: Gaza has been described as the biggest open-air prison in the world. Israel continues to plan settlement expansion and demolitions with impunity, and clearly US foreign policy is making things worse. When will the UK set a realistic timeframe to step up and recognise the state of Palestine?

Mr Hunt: We have always said that we will recognise the state of Palestine when the time is right—we support a two-state solution—but we want to do it at the moment it will have the most impact on the peace process.

T2. [908720] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Further to the question from the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), at a time when relations are improving greatly between Israel and many countries around the world, particularly its Gulf neighbours, will my right hon. Friend stress that not allowing Israeli swimmers to participate in the Paralympic qualifiers would be a retrograde step?

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): We also have strong relations with the Malaysian Government, and I am very disappointed that they have made what I feel is a fundamentally wrong decision. As
my hon. Friend has rightly pointed out, those Israeli Paralympic athletes should not be banned from competing. I shall be seeing the Malaysian Education Minister this afternoon—with, I think, a senior representative of the high commission—and I promise to ask for an assurance that this will be dealt with properly, as a matter of urgency.

Mr Hunt: I had a very good trip in the new year. We have excellent relations with both countries. What I find impressive is the fact that their prosperity has come about through openness to trade. In that regard, our post-Brexit foreign policy, embracing free trade, will be central.

Mark Field: What assessment did my right hon. Friend make of the future economic, trade and diplomatic relations with Singapore and Malaysia?

Mr Hunt: Of the almost 7,000 Yazidi women enslaved by ISIS, there are still very few who have received treatment for their physical and psychological injuries, and many have been unable to return to their homes. What more can the Government do to support those women, and to urge the Iraqi Government and the Administration in Kurdistan to work together to bring about their resettlement?

Alistair Burt: That is another good question. When I was last in Iraq I met agencies involved with Yazidi women, and I hope to go there again in the not too distant future to make the same representations. The difficulty of going back to such areas is related to the overall security situation in Iraq. It is essential for the Iraqi authorities to be able to protect everyone, and that work is ongoing in very difficult circumstances.
Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): With India entering the Open Doors world watch list top 10 and now designated as a country where Christians experience extreme persecution, what steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to promote the importance of religious freedom in India?

Mr Hunt: As my hon. Friend knows, I have just asked Bishop Philip Mounstephen, Bishop of Truro, to do an independent report on what more we can do to support the quarter of a billion Christians across the world facing persecution, but in India the British high commission regularly meets minority communities, including Christian groups, and we have recently enabled training for 900 minority students on faith issues in six universities.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): May I ask about human rights defenders in Bahrain, as we have close links with Bahrain? There is not time to name them now, but they are prominent people and I would like to give their names to the Minister afterwards, and they include Nabeel Rajab and political opposition leaders such as Sheikh Ali Salman, imprisoned for exercising their fundamental rights. What are we doing to get them out of jail?

Alistair Burt: As the right hon. Lady knows, all the prominent cases of human rights activists are carefully monitored by the UK representatives in Bahrain. There are independent processes in order to oversee the activities of the courts in Manama, and we urge that there is a consultation and dealings with them. We keep a constant eye on this; it is a matter for progress in Bahrain, and the United Kingdom is very involved in seeing greater progress there.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will Ministers use the United Nations as a forum where the United States can expose the Russian violation of the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty so that if America does withdraw, responsibility will lie where it should?

Mr Hunt: We are absolutely sure that Russia has been violating the terms of the INF treaty and that the way forward in this is to get back to compliance because it is vital for Europe’s security, but that starts with Russia recognising what it has done wrong.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What representations are the Government making to the Government of Nepal in relation to the recent case of the death of a woman and her two children who were suffocated while being confined in a poorly ventilated so-called period hut?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I must confess that I do not have direct knowledge of this case, but I will get in touch with Kathmandu to make sure we make representations on her behalf.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): When can we expect the report the Foreign Secretary has commissioned on UK support for persecuted Christians to be published, and will he make a statement at that time?

Mr Hunt: Subject to other parliamentary business I will welcome the opportunity to do that, because it is a very important issue. The timetable we are provisionally working to is that the interim report will be published before Easter, which will outline the issues faced by Christians all over the world, with the final report later in the year.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): We were told earlier that the Foreign Secretary has raised the brutal treatment of Muslims in China. I am interested to know what possible excuse his Chinese counterpart came up with for their medieval behaviour.

Mr Speaker: Let’s hear it.

Mr Hunt: It is fair to say that the responses we got in no way assured our concerns about what is happening. We do raise these issues: we raise them in private but we raise them persistently, and it is very important for the Chinese to know about the concern in this House and indeed across the country.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Following a further week of violence in Venezuela and a refugee crisis that is overwhelming its neighbours, what conversations have the Government had with the United States and Lima group countries to resolve this crisis?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): We are working very closely with the Lima group. I made a very firm statement in the last few days and indeed only yesterday 25 members of the National Guard revolted against President Maduro’s leadership. We are taking a very robust stand on this and we recognise the legitimacy of the constituent Assembly, as indeed should all countries.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Minister for the Middle East knows that we normally agree, but what on earth did he mean when he implied that we might normalise relations with the murderous tyrant Assad if he learned his lesson?

Alistair Burt: We do agree; there is no normalisation of the relationship with Syria. The point I was seeking to make was that before there can be any recognition of Syria, there has to be an understanding of what has happened there. We are looking for the regime, in its political settlement, to understand that it cannot continue to rule as it did in the past. There are no plans whatsoever for the United Kingdom to normalise any relationship with Syria. Looking at the numbers of deaths, of people killed and of murders committed by the regime, it is very difficult to see what arm of justice could possibly result in normalisation.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On the Bishop of Truro’s review of the Foreign Secretary’s review of persecution of the Christian Church, will the Foreign Secretary tell me what human and financial resources the bishop and his team will get to ensure that the report is done thoroughly?

Mr Hunt: Before I address that question, I need to correct the record. When the Minister for Europe and the Americas, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), talked about the constitutional assembly, he actually meant the National Assembly in Venezuela. We will extend all the necessary resources to the Bishop of Truro and his team. We have
had good discussions about the resources that they need. This is an important review, and we want to ensure that it is done properly.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his remarks on Zimbabwe. Has he—or the Minister for Africa—spoken directly to the South African Government? If not, he should do.

Mr Hunt: I agree with the hon. Lady, who is very wise on these matters. The answer, truthfully, is that I have tried to speak to the South African Foreign Minister and so far I have not been able to find a time that suits.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): There is widespread concern among the Muslim, Hindu, Tamil and Christian communities in Sri Lanka about the appointment of alleged war criminals to very senior positions. What representations has my right hon. Friend made to the Sri Lankan Government to prevent this from happening?

Mark Field: We welcome the progress that has been made towards a peaceful resolution of the destabilising situation in Sri Lanka that took place from late October onwards. Just last week, I welcomed the Speaker of the Sri Lankan Parliament to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and commended him for his central role in bringing that about. Clearly the situation in Sri Lanka is very fluid, and I would be happy to take specific representations from my hon. Friend about the particular concern that he has just raised.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): On Friday, the skirl of the bagpipes will be heard and haggis, neeps and tatties will be consumed in large quantities all over the world. Have the Government instructed their network of high commissions, embassies and consulates to facilitate the celebration of our Scottish national bard’s work and life all over the world?

Mr Speaker: Particularly in Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.

Mr Hunt: If we have not, we should.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I am pleased that the United Kingdom has regained its No. 1 spot in the Portland soft power top 30, particularly because we overtook France in order to do so. Although not every element of our soft power is under my right hon. Friend’s Department’s control, will he ensure that organisations such as the British Council and the BBC World Service are well funded and able to project our soft power globally as we leave the European Union?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right to mention those organisations; they do a very important job. I actually think that the role of the BBC in providing impartial news across the world is very underestimated; that is an area in which we could do much better.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will Ministers tell us what representations they are making to the Turkish authorities in relation to hunger strikes by Kurdish politicians and activists, and what representations have been made to end the persecution of Kurdish people?

Sir Alan Duncan: We are in regular dialogue with the Turkish Government, as is the Minister for the Middle East, specifically in respect of Syria and the Kurds.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Are Ministers aware of reports this week from China Aid that Christian persecution is escalating in China, and that it is now at its worst for 40 years? Thousands of churches have been desecrated and destroyed, and pastors have been imprisoned and are facing trial. Whole sections of society, including children under 18 and students, have been banned from going to church, and those who do attend church are now being filmed and fingerprinted. What can be done to raise this issue internationally?

Mr Hunt: I share my hon. Friend’s concern. I read a moving report about a pastor in Chengdu who has suffered greatly. We raised these concerns during the universal periodic review that we did with China in November 2018, and I regularly raise concerns about human rights issues with my Chinese counterpart. One of the reasons for doing the review is to ensure that I am properly informed on matters of religious freedom.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Given the Minister for the Middle East’s earlier expression of support for UNRWA and the concern about the alternative education that Palestinian children might receive if UNRWA pulls out, will the UK Government consider filling the vacuum resulting from the withdrawal of US leadership in this important service?

Alistair Burt: In reference to the question from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), I am appropriately wearing my tartan tie to celebrate this week.

As I indicated earlier, we support UNRWA’s work and work hard with the organisation in case reform is needed. In the long term, UNRWA’s future will be about the future of refugees and their final settlement status. In the meantime, we cannot completely plug the financial gap left by the United States, which is why we are working with others, but leadership is vital, as is trying to get it across to the world that UNRWA is doing important work, and the UK will remain a champion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Demand always exceeds supply, but I thank the Foreign Secretary and his team, who have been addressing the House, the nation and, very importantly, the world—the planet!
John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if he will update the House on the action taken and planned by the Government with respect to high-rise residential blocks with dangerous cladding.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): There is nothing more important than ensuring that people are safe in their homes, and we remain determined to ensure that no community suffers again as the community did so tragically and appallingly at Grenfell Tower. Within days of that tragedy, a comprehensive building safety programme was put in place to ensure that residents of high-rise blocks of flats are safe and feel safe now and in the future. Our Department has worked with fire and rescue services, local authorities and landlords to identify high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding and to ensure that interim safety measures are in place until issues are permanently remediated. Measures have included waking watch, which has been put in place in all high-rise buildings with ACM cladding, with the oversight of the National Fire Chiefs Council. As of 31 December last year, interim measures have been in place on all 176 high-rise private residential buildings with unsafe ACM cladding.

Permanent remediation must rightly now be our key focus. On 18 December, we published our plan to implement the recommendations of Dame Judith Hackitt’s independent review of building regulations and fire safety, which will create a stronger regulatory framework and fix the issues for the long term. We have repeatedly called on private building owners not to pass costs on to leaseholders who find themselves in this position through no fault of their own. We have also warned private building owners that, unless they remove and replace unsafe ACM cladding from their high-rise residential buildings now, local authorities have the power to complete the works and recover the costs from the owner. As a result of our interventions, we have secured commitments from owners of 268 privately owned buildings, 212 of whom have either started works, completed them or have commitments in place to remediate. There remain 42 private residential buildings for which the owner’s plans are unclear, so we are maintaining pressure and rule out no solutions.

This is obviously a matter of great importance to many colleagues and, indeed, to many constituents, and that is reflected in the huge amount of activity that is taking place both within the Department, externally within the industry and, critically, in this House. There is an Adjournment debate tomorrow, and I will appear at oral questions and before the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on Monday.

John Healey: It should be a cause for national shame that, over 19 months after the Grenfell Tower fire, I am having to drag Ministers to the House because there are still buildings in this country cloaked in Grenfell-style cladding and residents who do not know whether their homes are safe, as the Daily Mirror has revealed today. It is shocking that the Government’s own figures show that there were 437 high-rise blocks with the same Grenfell-style cladding and that 370 are yet to have it removed and replaced. It is shocking that the Minister knows every one of those blocks but will not name the landlords or tell the residents. Whatever he says he is doing, it is not working. For over 19 months, any progress made has simply been too slow, too weak and always following pressure from this House and from Labour. If the Government cannot fix problems this serious and urgent, what on earth are they in office for?

Here is a six-point plan to sort out the problems, and this is what we have been arguing for months. First, widen the Government testing programme to cover all suspect cladding, not just ACM cladding. Secondly, set a deadline for all blocks to be made safe. Thirdly, make clear the legal duty for block owners to get this work done, and to pay for it without passing on the bill to hard-pressed leaseholders. Fourthly, set up a loan fund for private blocks. Fifthly, name the landlords and tell the residents so that the public know the safety status of all high-rise blocks. Finally, toughen the sanctions, up to and including taking over blocks to get this vital fire safety work done.

For more than nine months, as the Minister has repeated today, the Secretary of State has said that he is not ruling anything out. It is time to rule things in, and it is time to reverse the refusal to act on all these fronts.

In the days after the Grenfell tragedy, the Prime Minister promised the nation:

“My Government will do whatever it takes to...keep our people safe.”

When will the Minister finally be able to come to this House to tell us and the public that the Government have honoured that pledge?

Kit Malthouse: I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman has sought to make this such an antagonistic exchange in what is a difficult and complicated situation that requires significant amounts of engineering and construction work, which will necessarily take time. He will know that the response from both the Department and the Government in the aftermath of the Grenfell tragedy was immediate and wide-ranging. The commissioning of Dame Judith Hackitt to conduct her inquiry was an important step forward in tackling this issue.

Since then, significant resource and effort have been injected into the need to remove this cladding, but the vital first step was to make sure that people living in high-rise blocks with ACM cladding were safe immediately, and those steps were put in place immediately. We now know, and can tell everyone in tower blocks with this cladding, that they are safe tonight. The Government’s primary focus was to make sure there were enough interim measures in place and that local fire and rescue services were satisfied that the buildings were immediately safe, while at the same time providing the resources, assistance and support—and, yes, cajoling some in the private sector to do their duty and replace this cladding.

That is what we continue to do, and we are making significant progress. However, the right hon. Gentleman is correct that we will get to a point where, for a small number—we are now down to a small number—of owners or contractors who put this cladding on buildings, we will need to consider more assertive measures, and those measures are under active consideration at the moment. All the while, in all of this—he may present himself as an expert, but I am certainly not an expert—we
are guided by expert opinion, which includes Dame Judith Hackitt’s review and the independent expert advisory panel that was constituted in the immediate aftermath of Grenfell. We follow their advice in making sure that we can guarantee people’s safety tonight.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I agree with my hon. Friend. That would help to reduce the costs for firms that want to take such remediation measures, and make it easier for them to do so.

Kit Malthouse: As I said in my earlier answer to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), I believe we are making progress on remediation. That is particularly true in the social sector, but we are now seeing signs that significant progress is being made in the private sector with the number of buildings that have been completed, the commitments that have been made and the work that is ongoing.

Regarding the Manchester situation that is on the front page of the paper today, I understand that the local fire and rescue service is satisfied that everybody will be safe in that building tonight, and that temporary measures are in place while the work is being done. There seems to be some complication about getting that work done, but it is being done.

Sadly, I have not met the Minister whom the hon. Lady mentioned, but as she will know, we are reviewing approved document B—the fire safety building regulations—and we would welcome any contribution towards that consultation to help us to get this right.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Assertive measures are urgent for my constituents at Northpoint in Bromley, one of the 42 buildings where the owner—in this case Citistead, an offshoot of the Tchenguiz family trust—refuses to meet its obligations and insists that it will use a term in the lease to pass on the costs to the flat owners regardless. The Government need to introduce a legally foolproof mechanism to override those provisions and prevent my constituents and others from being forced to pick up the tab. Words are not enough.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is a fierce advocate for his constituency, and we share his concern about the position of the Northpoint residents. We have been very clear that leaseholders should not bear the cost, and he will be pleased to learn that the Secretary of State has written to the building owner and other parties concerned to make it clear that he expects them to fund the work.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just written to the Select Committee about the role of local authorities, and local authorities clearly have powers under the Housing Act 2004. When building owners will not act and the local authority acts instead, it may incur costs that it can try to recover from building owners. Can we have an absolute guarantee from the Minister that when local authorities find it impossible to do so, the Government will find that money so that it will not have to be found from hard-pressed local authority budgets?

Kit Malthouse: The Chair of the Select Committee raises an important point. We have offered financial assistance to local authorities, and we will work in partnership with them to attempt to recover the money. Where that proves to be impossible, we will try to reach as convenient and financially efficacious an arrangement as possible.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): May I ask my hon. Friend about Hartopp Point and Lanning Point, two 14-storey blocks in Fulham that are rumoured to face demolition? Residents—including leaseholders who are worried about getting proper compensation—are extremely concerned, and opposition Conservative
councillors are calling for an emergency council meeting
tomorrow night. Will he join me in urging Hammersmith
and Fulham Council to lift the secrecy from its proposals
and communicate properly with concerned tenants and
leaseholders?

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend raises what
sounds like an alarming situation. Where people’s homes
are concerned—whether it is about safety, the future of
their homes or, indeed, demolition—I urge all those in
authority to be as transparent as possible. It can be
extremely debilitating, concerning and worrying for any
resident to have the future of their home mired in
uncertainty. I hope that he gets the clarity that his
residents need.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): If
the Minister was one of my constituents in the X1 block
in Manchester, I am sure that, like them, he would have
woken up this morning feeling not only worried and
scared, but furious—furious at the way in which the
matter has come to light, and furious that there is still,
after all this time, no accountability, no transparency
and no recourse for the people affected. We urgently
need legislation, which must also cover leaseholders
who, like those in many of the blocks in my constituency,
cannot sell their homes because of the fear that they
will have to pay the cost of recladding. This has got to
stop.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is quite right; given the
story on the front of the paper, anyone who lived in that
block would be worried. We have reassured ourselves
that the Greater Manchester fire and rescue service is
satisfied that everybody resident in that block is safe	onight, and that there has been sufficient engagement
by the owners and managing agents to make sure that the
temporary measures that are in place are adequate
to keep residents safe.

We understand that there is work under way. I believe
that that work has been contracted, but it is yet to be
made clear who will pay. We will put pressure on the
owners and managers of that building, as we are doing
with all owners and managers, to make sure that it is
not the leaseholders who pay. At this stage, we are not
ruling out any particular measure for making sure that
that is the case.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The
Housing Minister is doing excellent work on the matter,
both behind the scenes and out in front. I have spoken
to him about it on a number of occasions. Particularly
with private sector buildings where there is no obvious
freeholder responsible for replacing the cladding, does
he consider that central Government should step in and
fund the cost of replacement until it can be established
who is responsible for it, after which they should reclaim
that money?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is quite right, and he
points to something that will become an increasingly
difficult issue. In a number of cases, the freeholder of a
building—essentially, the owner of the building—may
well be obscure, overseas, difficult to contact or, indeed,
dormant company. In those circumstances, as the
Chair of the Select Committee pointed out, local authorities
have the power to enter the premises and do the work.
We have offered financial support to make sure that it
gets done.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): I am very
concerned to see the Minister treating this like some
kind of theoretical exercise. People are genuinely afraid
in their beds and it is not really enough for the Minister
to say that he is satisfied. Seventy-two of my neighbours—
including those who had warned people about their
fears—died in the worst possible circumstances, in front
of their neighbours. Hundreds were made homeless, and
19 months later many are still homeless. Nearly 700 children
have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder,
as have nearly 1,500 adults.

This was all preventable. Look at the cases over the
years in which people have died in fires spread by
external cladding, including at Summerland leisure centre,
Knowsley Heights, Garnock Court and Lakanal House,
where the coroner advised specifically how the Government
should change building regulations to keep people safe.
Nothing has yet changed. The Government are ignoring
warnings, and our constituents are going to bed afraid.
Current measures are not working. One of the Grenfell
survivors said:

“Grenfell 2 is in the post.”

How many more must die before the Government take
positive action to keep people safe in their beds?

Kit Malthouse: I am sorry that the hon. Lady has not
acknowledged the significant amount of work that has
since taken place, not least the work of Dame Judith
Hackett, which has been seminal and foundational in
our changing of the building regulations for the future.
The hon. Lady should be under no illusion about the
seriousness with which I take the matter. It has occupied
very significant amounts of my time, since I was appointed
in the summer, including chairing the ministerial taskforce,
having regular meetings with the team internally to
make sure that we are driving performance and numbers
and, critically, engaging with the Grenfell community,
as I have done on many occasions, both individually
and collectively. That included, movingly, attending the
silent walk that took place just before Christmas. We
believe this a significant part of our responsibility to
make sure that everybody is safe.

As I said earlier in response to the right hon. Member
for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), our primary
concern is to make sure that every resident is safe	onight. Whatever measures are required—whether a
waking watch, the retrofitting of heat sensors or smoke
alarms, new doors, or whatever else it might be—our
primary concern is that every local fire and rescue
service can guarantee to the Department that everybody
who is in a residential building of more than 18 metres
is safe tonight.

The secondary concern of importance is getting the
remediation done. We are making significant progress
on that and will be accelerating that progress in the next
few months.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In evidence to
the Select Committee, Rockwool has claimed that there
are more than 1,600 high-rise buildings with unsafe
cladding, rather than the 397—I think—that the
Department claims. That is a clear, massive disparity.
Will my hon. Friend make sure before he comes before the Select Committee next Monday that we are given a clear explanation of why there is this wide disparity and that he will take action to make sure that all 1,600 buildings are made safe?

**Kit Malthouse** (Heysmoor Heights) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point of which we should not lose sight: there are types of cladding other than ACM cladding. He will know that the Department issued advice to building owners in December 2017 on how to investigate non-ACM cladding systems on their buildings and remediate them. At the Secretary of State’s request, the expert panel reviewed and updated that guidance in December last year, and it reiterates that the clearest way to ensure safety is to remove any unsafe materials. We have commissioned the Building Research Establishment to conduct a programme of testing on non-ACM materials, and we expect that testing to start shortly.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that however strongly worded the letters that he writes to property owners are, they have no legal status whatsoever, so those owners can legally ignore them? Given that, will he tell us what the timescale is for the decision on when he will proceed to legislation; exactly what factors he will bear in mind when he makes that decision; and at what point property owners will know if they refuse to act, legal action will be taken to force them to do so?

**Kit Malthouse** (Windsor) (Con): Whatever the status of the work that has been done by the Department and of the letters from the Secretary of State, it is bearing some fruit. A large number of companies have taken their responsibilities seriously and are now funding remediation, some of which is quite elderly, and they are doing it for all the right reasons. We are working on the group who have yet to acknowledge their responsibilities and are hopeful of more success on that. As far as legislation is concerned, the hon. Lady will know that just before Christmas we published the Hackitt implementation plan for consultation, along with several other calls for evidence and consultations. Once they are all in and completed, we will produce the legislative programme.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): The Minister has mentioned a number of small private developers and, indeed, individual freeholders, but will he write to me about Premier House in Edgware, to ensure that my local leaseholders and constituents do not have to foot the bill for the removal and replacement of materials that are considered dangerous? My constituents have already paid out thousands of pounds to their freeholder, a small independent developer. Although they are grateful for the Minister’s support, the leaseholders want legal clarity and certainty that they will not be forced to pay any additional moneys.

**Kit Malthouse** (Heysmoor Heights) (Con): My hon. Friend is quite right to raise the interests of his constituents. I am not aware of the particular situation, but I am more than happy to investigate and write to him, as he requests.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is quite extraordinary that the Minister has just said that testing on non-ACM-clad buildings is about to start. There are around 340 high-rise buildings clad with non-ACM combustible materials, and more than 1,000 high-risk buildings. Will he guarantee, now, that those buildings—like Lakanal House, where six people died 10 years ago—will all be tested and treated in the same way as ACM-clad buildings?

**Kit Malthouse** (Heysmoor Heights) (Con): In considering what we should do about non-ACM cladding, we have been guided by the expert panel, which includes Dame Judith Hackitt, on how we should proceed, and we are proceeding on the panel’s best advice. As I said, we expect testing on non-ACM cladding to begin shortly, and the conclusions of that work will obviously colour what action is taken next.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The Minister and I share a local government background, particularly in relation to the fire service, so he will be aware of the importance of not only how regulations are set up but how they are enforced, and I am sure that he shares my concerns about the changes that were made a decade ago. As part of his review of building regulations, what consideration is he giving to ensuring that they are actually complied with?

**Kit Malthouse** (Heysmoor Heights) (Con): With his usual acuity, my hon. Friend puts his finger on an important point. As part of her review, Dame Judith Hackitt considered whether there is an inherent conflict of interest for those who are implementing buildings and paying for building regulation and therefore being inspected. That is one of the issues that we will explore with the industry. It is about how we can ensure professional standards and professional independence in safety-critical situations.

**Dame Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I have previously raised in the Chamber the situation of my constituents in Heysmoor Heights in Liverpool. They live in a high-rise property owned by the offshore company Abacus Land 4. My constituents have already paid for replacement cladding. The situation in relation to insurance cover is completely confused: constituents were told that it was covered, but are now told that it is not. In view of the Minister’s commitment that private owners should not pass on the cost of replacement cladding to leaseholders, will he intervene in the case of Heysmoor Heights?

**Kit Malthouse** (Heysmoor Heights) (Con): I am more than happy to look into the specific situation and write to the hon. Lady once I have had a review from the Department.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): For a variety of reasons, local authorities with high-rise social housing are in the process of taking it down. That includes Rugby Borough Council, which is about to demolish two blocks at Biart Place, where there are structural concerns, and replace them with a larger number of conventional housing units. Does the Minister agree that this process should be accelerated?

**Kit Malthouse** (Heysmoor Heights) (Con): It is typical of my hon. Friend to fight for improvements for his constituents. I agree that for buildings built in the 1960s and ’70s—I do not know what period the buildings he refers to are—refurbishment often presents more challenges than demolishing and replacing them. In doing so, the consideration of a
different formulation—including streets, squares, low rise and high density—may well be preferable to high rise.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Of course, grave fire risk is no respecter of boundaries within the UK. We heard a wee snippet from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on what the Scottish Government are doing about this issue; dare I assume that Her Majesty’s Government and the devolved Administrations are communicating and co-ordinating to establish the safest possible regime throughout the United Kingdom?

Kit Malthouse: These are obviously devolved matters, but the hon. Gentleman should be reassured that, certainly in respect of my responsibilities in this country, we will leave no stone unturned and turn away advice from no one if they are getting it right. As I have said, we are currently going through a series of consultations to get this right. If the Scottish or, indeed, Welsh experience can inform our consultation on approved document B—the building regulations—I would be more than happy to consider it.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Minister tries to assure our constituents that they can sleep at night, but I remind him that when he was a London deputy Mayor making fire service cuts and shutting down fire stations, he also assured us that people could sleep at night. Subsequently, we had the Grenfell disaster. I respectfully ask him to take this matter very seriously, or he will not be able to sleep at night because of the prospect of people continuing to live in danger. There are 41 blocks in my constituency that need urgent action; he needs to legislate now.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is quite right to point out that I have spent a significant period in the frontline of public safety policy delivery. I like to think that my record in doing so, particularly on crime, speaks for itself. She will know that during my time at City hall as deputy Mayor for policing, we drove crimes, including teenage murder, down to 20-year lows. We did that by application, dedication and commitment, and I am giving exactly the same to this subject.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Nineteen months on from the Grenfell tragedy and despite all the warm words, not one penny has been forthcoming from the Government to help Birmingham City Council make safe 213 tower blocks in which 10,000 households live. Now the Department has at last written to the city council to ensure that our city’s tenants are safe.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Rockwool is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), but a number of its workforce live in Bridgend. They have come to see me to reiterate the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that Rockwool’s product, which is fire resistant and has thermal and acoustic properties, is not being promoted in relation to the work that is ongoing. It is non-ACM. Why are we not looking at other products that could also enhance the retrofitting of buildings throughout the UK?

Kit Malthouse: I recognise the hon. Lady’s concern, but I am sure that she will agree that it is not for the Government to promote any particular product. The Government’s job is to set the framework in which those who are fundamentally responsible for building safety—that is those who build them and those who own them—are able to make the proper assessment of the safety of the products that they are using. It is quite obvious to everybody that the Grenfell Tower tragedy lifted a big flat rock on the building regulation system and showed that it has not functioned for some time across a number of Governments. We are trying to rectify that and to provide a framework in which developers, building owners and, critically, residents can be sure that the materials used to construct their homes are safe.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): One of the 42 blocks that was mentioned by the Minister is New Providence Wharf, which is owned by Ballymore in my constituency. He repeatedly says that there are measures under active consideration to get these owners to comply. When will we actually see what these measures are?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that the New Providence Wharf situation is one of those that is currently unresolved. We are engaged with Ballymore, which is the owner at the moment, and it is making the case that leaseholders should carry the cost. We have made it clear to it that that is not the case, and we will keep up the pressure and hope for a resolution soon.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Local Government Association says that it continues strongly to urge the Government to ban the use of any combustible materials on high-rise and high-risk buildings. Rockwool has been in touch with me about two buildings in Hull North: the Bransholme Health Centre and the Allam Medical Building. I am concerned to hear that these buildings have materials that are combustible and could be dangerous. Is the Minister concerned, as I am, about these type of buildings not being part of his proposed plan?

Kit Malthouse: I am, of course, concerned to hear that, and the hon. Lady will know that we introduced a complete ban on combustible materials on buildings over 18 metres just before Christmas. That ban is not retrospective. However, all building owners have a duty to ensure that their buildings are safe, and if they believe, after assessing their buildings, that they are not safe, they also have a duty to remediate. It is almost impossible for us, I guess, to tour the country and
review every single circumstance, which is why we are stressing that this primary responsibility for this lies with the building owner. If she knows of buildings that she believes are not safe, and the building owner is not taking the action that is required, she should, in the first instance, speak to her local authority colleagues who have the power to intervene. If that fails then, by all means, write to me.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): As has been mentioned, I represent Rockwool, which has its base in my constituency—the only base in the UK. The Minister says in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) that it is not Government’s job to legislate on the use of whichever materials a house builder may need and that is down to the house builder. I am sorry, but I do not agree with him. Ministers legislate all the time on health and safety matters. The reality is that we should not have combustible insulation inside tower blocks, hospitals or schools. The Government could legislate on that today for public safety.

Kit Malthouse: Perhaps I was not as clear as I should have been. The hon. Gentleman is quite right. We have banned combustible cladding, which includes insulation, from all high-rise buildings. Anything that forms the skin of the wall and is combustible is now banned for new buildings. The point that I was making to the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) is that it is not for us to legislate that a particular company’s product should be used. What we are in the process of doing is a review of approved document B. I urge both him and his constituents to contribute to the consultation on approved document B to make sure that we are getting the standards to which products must adhere right so that people within the industry can make a selection among products that they know have been tested correctly and are at the right standard to show that they are not combustible and can be used safely on high-rise buildings. That is exactly what we are trying to establish at the moment through the review and I urge him and all colleagues who have questioned me today to participate in that consultation.

Proxy Voting

1.16 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Leader of the House of Commons if she will make a statement on the obstacles to introducing proxy voting in Parliament.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this urgent question. I thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) for her question. I have great respect for her, particularly for her invaluable work on the steering group to establish the Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy. She has also been a strong voice on the issue of proxy voting and I know that many of us enjoyed seeing her in her place during the previous debate on this matter with baby Gabriel.

I am also delighted that the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) welcomed a new baby boy, Raphael, on Thursday. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in sending our very best wishes. There are a number of Members right across the House who are expecting babies in the coming months and so I know that this matter is, quite rightly, of huge importance to many.

I profoundly believe that all new parents should be able to spend uninterrupted time with their new baby. That is vital both for the physical and mental wellbeing of parents and their babies. Working to give every baby the best start in life has been a passion of mine for many years, and during this time I have had the pleasure of working closely with many hon. and right hon. Members across the House.

I was delighted that the Prime Minister asked me to chair a cross-Government ministerial group in June to explore what more the Government can do to improve the cradle-to-grave effects that result from better support in this critical period of our lives. The group that I chair will make recommendations to relevant Secretaries of State on how the Government can improve the co-ordination and cost-effectiveness of early years family support, and identify gaps in available provision. I am delighted to be visiting Home Start and Sure Start in Manchester this Friday with the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) to hear directly from parents about their experiences.

I assure the House that I am absolutely committed to making progress on the issue of proxy voting, and I am truly delighted to be able to confirm to the House today that a substantive motion on proxy leave in the case of maternity, paternity and adoption has been tabled today for the House’s agreement on Monday 28 January.

The motion I have tabled will largely follow the helpful recommendations set out in the Procedure Committee’s fifth report of the Session. It will facilitate baby leave for Members of Parliament and implement the House’s decision to agree to proxy voting in instances of baby leave.

The motion and Standing Order changes that I will table deviate in two minor ways from the drafting in the Procedure Committee report. First, the motion will provide for a pilot scheme of one year, with a formal review at the end of that by the Procedure Committee to ensure that it is working well. Secondly, for that
reason, the Standing Order is temporary, and in agreement with the Clerks, the ability to make provision for proxy voting in so far as not provided for by the Standing Order was deemed unnecessary for the scheme to be fully workable. Those are the two minor changes.

This is a perfect example of how Parliament can work collaboratively to bring about important change, demonstrating the work of many colleagues from all parties, who have been determined to see this happen. This is a really positive moment for many colleagues across the House. There have been a number of constructive debates about this issue, and ultimately it is clear to me that the balance of opinion is that baby leave is a unique period of time and is crucial for new parents. This is a step forward, removing the choice between parliamentary and parental responsibilities and helping to make Parliament a more modern workplace.

I do hope that the House will be of the same opinion, and that it will fully support the motion next week to bring forward a pilot scheme for proxy voting.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Jo Swinson: First, I absolutely share in the congratulations that the Leader of the House is sending—I am sure from the whole House—to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on the birth of her gorgeous baby boy, Raphael.

I thought that things were pretty bad when, back in June in the heat wave, I was 10 days past my due date, but the Government’s response to the House’s instruction to introduce proxy voting gives a whole new meaning to the word overdue. In all seriousness, I congratulate the Leader of the House on her work and on getting to this stage: she is a genuine advocate. Those of us who have worked hard on this issue—the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and those of us who have recently been pregnant or are currently pregnant—know from our meetings with the Leader of the House that she has been seriously helping to drive this initiative within Government, I am sure to her frustration at times, because she is committed to this issue. However, it is shameful that last week the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn was put in the invidious position of having to make a choice—weighing up the potential health risks to her baby against whether her constituents could have their voice heard on the biggest issue of our time. Nobody should be put in such a position.

I would also say, for the record, that I think that it is disgusting that some have suggested that the hon. Lady was just trying to make a point. She was put in an impossible position and she made a choice. The judgment that comes from all corners of parents making choices like that, and all sorts of others, is out of order. We should respect the choice that she made.

Yes, the hon. Lady was offered a pair—that is what some people have said: “She was offered a pair.” But it is the Government’s fault that pairing is entirely discredited as a mechanism to enable pregnant MPs and new parents to discharge their responsibilities. I was nursing my two-week-old baby in July when I found out that the person I was paired with had voted anyway. He had not voted all day; he had voted in just the two Divisions that happened to be very close—one that the Government lost and one that they won. So forgive me if I am a bit sceptical about the assurances that we were given that that was a genuine mistake, because the result of the Chief Whip’s behaviour—as it then turned out, others had been asked to break their pairs too—was to cheat my constituents out of their voice on one of the biggest issues of our time: Brexit. So some Members of the Government—not the Leader of the House—have been dragged kicking and screaming to this position.

I also think we should put on record thanks to Esther Webber of The Times, whose article suggesting that it was the Chief Whip who was blocking this issue is, I suspect, not entirely unrelated to the date at which this announcement has been brought forward today, in response to this urgent question.

However, I ask the Leader of the House, why the delay? It has been nearly a year—five babies born; three more on the way. Does she appreciate the appalling message that that sends out about maternity rights? Fifty-four thousand women a year lose their jobs because of pregnancy and maternity discrimination, and the Government’s response has been completely inadequate. The charade that we have seen in this House just underlines that message.

The baby son of the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn is five days old. We in law do not allow new mothers to work for two weeks after their baby is born, which is why I am delighted that the Leader of the House says that the House will discuss this issue on Monday. May I ask her some practical questions? Will the motion have time allocated to it, so that it is not possible for a single voice to shout “Object!” and stop the debate happening? What discussions has she had with the Speaker’s Office to make sure that all the preparatory work is done, and that a scheme is in place, so that if the House approves the motion on Monday, the scheme can be in place on Tuesday?

Of course, that does not get round the issue of the voice of the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn being heard on Monday for that vote. Perhaps the Leader of the House might like to suggest a pair for the hon. Lady on Monday evening—I do not know what the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is doing then, but somebody like him may well appreciate having the night off.

We have waited long enough for this change. Modernising the House of Commons is a slow and laborious process—frankly, it is often quite like childbirth—so let us get on with it. I hope that on Monday night I will walk through the Lobby with the Mother of the House, the Leader of the House and many modernising MPs from all parties to get this done.

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that I consider the hon. Lady to be a friend and I entirely understand her frustration. I will respond to her questions in turn.

First, the hon. Lady talks about the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). As I said in business questions last Thursday, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn was offered a pair. She has also received an invitation to be nodded through should she wish her vote to be recorded. That would obviously require her to come to this place at some point during the day before the vote, when her name would be recorded; but in the meantime, she is invited to have a pair. I understand that she had a pair yesterday.
As the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) knows, until proxy voting is in place, that remains the way in which those with illnesses and those having parental leave are accommodated. She will also be aware, as was said at the time, that the breaking of the pair in her case on, I believe, 17 July was done entirely in error. My right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) apologised directly to her, as did my right hon. Friend the Chief Whip on behalf of the Whips Office. I apologise to the House again, but I can assure all Members that it is intended that a pair be provided for the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn should she wish it, as was the case yesterday.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire asks about the delay. She will appreciate that this is a fundamental break with the past in this House. She will also appreciate that I wrote to the Procedure Committee in November 2017, asking it to look into this matter, because it was a significant change for the House, and the Committee raised a number of issues that needed resolution. For example, when should a proxy be used? Could it be just for Government business? Should it be for private business? Should it be for a closure motion? Should it be for life-or-death decisions only? Those were very important questions. Also, who should offer the proxy? Who should be the proxy? Who should provide that role, and what sort of consequences does that offer for the individual who may be voting against their conscience on behalf of another Member? Finally, there is the question of whether proxy should be used only for those on baby leave rather than for those who are ill or who have other priorities.

Those were significant questions and I understand the hon. Lady’s frustration at the time it is taking, but we have had a number of very constructive debates, and I believe that we have concluded that the issue of baby leave is unique, and therefore should have priority. That is why I am able to bring this forward today.

Finally, with the breaking of pairs, I totally understand that in the hon. Lady’s case that was extremely regrettable, and I believe that we have concluded that the issue of baby leave is unique, and therefore should have priority. That is why I am able to bring this forward today.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for what she has said. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) also asked what discussions the Leader of the House had had with my office, to which the answer is that the Leader of the House and I have discussed this matter from time to time. I have made extremely clear privately, as I have made extremely clear publicly, my desire for progressive change and my impatience with its absence. More particularly, what I would like to say to the hon. Lady and for the benefit of the House is this: I can assure colleagues that if and when the House agrees to the necessary resolution and Standing Order, I will ensure that I have a scheme ready to be activated, so that Members can rapidly—indeed, I think instantly—apply for a proxy vote, and their nominated proxy can then cast that vote the next day. I think colleagues will agree that that is crystal clear.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House not only for her statement but for her personal commitment to supporting, in particular, pregnant and new mothers—and new fathers—in Parliament. I fully support what she has outlined today. She talked about modernising the workplace. Proxy voting is only one aspect of modernising this, frankly, prehistoric workplace in Parliament. So many aspects of Parliament need modernisation, and change, as this issue has shown, is far too slow and fragmented. Where does responsibility for driving forward that change lie? I know that it does not lie with the Government.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her comment and question. I completely agree with her. Many of us—if not all of us—across this House want Parliament to be a more family-friendly place. There have been a huge number of efforts, including by you, Mr Speaker, and by right hon. and hon. Members across the House to change the sitting hours to make them more family-friendly, for example. There are now better childcare facilities on the estate. There is a greater use of technology to make it easier to go about our jobs. We have done a huge amount of work, with cross-party collaboration, to bring in a new behaviour code and a new complaints procedure to make people feel that they can be treated with the dignity and respect that everybody deserves in this place. There is a huge amount more to do. I am committed to working with colleagues to make more progress. My right hon. Friend and I met only yesterday to talk about what more we can do, cross-party, to try to ensure that we have a more family-friendly Parliament that encourages people from all walks of life to want to come here and take up a role representing their constituents.

Mr Speaker: The responsibility is shared, but on a point of fact, as I suspect the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) knows, responsibility on this matter was manifestly and incontrovertibly that of the Government, as the Procedure Committee recognised. That responsibility has been discharged today by the Leader of the House, and I thank her for it. It is very important that we proceed on the basis of factual knowledge and not of misguided perception.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her response and congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) on securing this urgent question. I think Andrew is the only one of her family not to be in the Chamber. Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker, because it has allowed us to get some further information.

It seems that it is not only the Prime Minister who returns frequently to this House and tells us that nothing has changed. It must be catching, as we have been promised yet a further debate. This is the second urgent question on proxy voting for baby leave in the space of six months, the last being on 18 July 2018 in the wake of the shameful events when a pair was deliberately broken by a Government Minister. The Leader of the House
honoured her promise of a debate on 13 September. We have had two debates, and yet no further progress, despite there being broad agreement, and the will of the House being known, on the principle of proxy voting for baby leave. This House is debating and voting on one of the most significant issues that this country has faced, and yet last week a Member who was heavily pregnant, but who wanted her vote counted and recorded to fulfil her duties to her constituents, had no other option but to come to the House. It is time that we ensured that this is a modern workplace with modern employment practices for those with baby leave.

I know that the Leader of the House wants urgently to find a way forward and is not the block in the Government to these reforms. Today we hear about the Prime Minister of New Zealand—she knows that there is a work-life balance, even in that position. Everyone can find a way. Both Australia and New Zealand have a system, so there is absolutely no reason why we cannot look at those precedents and come up with our own solution.

I welcome the fact that the Leader of the House has announced not just a motion but a debate. Will it be on a voteable motion? Will there be time for amendments? For how long will the debate take place? Why, given the paucity of the Government’s parliamentary agenda, can the Leader of the House not secure sufficient Government time? She has not actually said how long the debate will be and whether it is on a voteable motion. Will she say, in response to the question by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire and to mine, whether we can vote and whether this principle will be secured by a vote on Monday?

As I set out from the Dispatch Box on 18 July and 13 September, Her Majesty’s Opposition—the Labour party—support the principle of proxy voting for baby leave. As I have repeatedly set out, there is a way that baby leave can be introduced today, without the need for a debate, through public agreement by all the parties to nod through those on baby leave for every Division. As I mentioned in a previous debate, there is a way that we could ensure that those voting by this means are denoted with a star. I even offered the idea of a baby emoji—I am sure that someone will come up with that. That will give full transparency to the public as to how Members have voted.

On 13 September, I asked about the evidence that the Leader of the House was going to take. She said that she wanted to take evidence on unintended consequences and various other issues. Has she taken this evidence? When will she report back to the House on it? Could she share that evidence with the House, and at least with the Chair of the Procedure Committee, who is in his place? As I offered on 18 July, will she agree to meet me today to discuss this?

It is vital that we are a modern workplace—that those on baby leave can have their vote recorded and take part in our proceedings as they are elected to do. I appreciate that the Government are putting forward the motion, but it does not guarantee any time for us to debate or give Members a vote to decide on this matter once and for all. Will the Leader of the House please be clear on that? We need to make this Parliament the modern, progressive and equal Parliament that we all want to achieve.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Well, I do not quite know where to start, because the hon. Lady will be aware that, as I have just made quite clear, Members can be nodded through if they request that. If they come to this place, their name can be recorded. They can, equally, request a pair. So she is pointing out something that is self-evident. On her other point, proxy voting does require a motion of this House, so she is actually not correct to say that people can just be offered a proxy vote as of today. That would be to undermine the right of this House to take decisions on its own procedures.

The hon. Lady asks if there will be a debate and a vote. I thought I had made it clear, but perhaps not, that, as I mentioned in my remarks, the motion that I have tabled today will enable the House to take a decision on Monday on whether it wishes to accept the Procedure Committee’s report, as amended, or not. So it will not be a further debate, as she says. We have had a number of debates.

As I also thought I had made clear, the evidence I took was on issues such as what sorts of motions should be eligible for proxy voting, who the proxy vote should be made by, and what sorts of circumstances should merit a proxy vote.

Finally, the hon. Lady asks if I will meet her today. If she looks in her diary, she will see that we are supposed to be meeting this afternoon.

**Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I welcome the Leader of the House’s statement to the House today. I fully support proxy voting. In my experience of having a baby while being an MP, the guilt that you feel, as a mum to a newborn, about having to drag a three-week-old baby across the country is immense. I lost count of the number of times I was called at the last minute to come and vote. I recall one occasion when I jumped on a train, baby in tow, voted, and got back to Yorkshire at 11 o’clock at night, only to receive a call saying that I needed to be back the next day. So I know that feeling of guilt and I am pleased that the Leader of the House mentioned the emotional impact on a new mum as well. We already have a fantastic nursery in Parliament that my little son, Clifford, attends. I understand that that was a pet project of Mr Speaker, so I welcome his bringing that to the House. Does my right hon. Friend agree that proxy voting will safeguard this precious mummy and baby bonding time?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I certainly love looking at my hon. Friend’s Facebook photos of little Clifford. It is great to feel that we get to see him a bit even though he is not often in the Chamber. Yes, I completely agree with her. What proxy voting will do for this place is to enable parents to have that precious bonding time with their new babies.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) for securing what has turned out to be a fruitful urgent question. I very much welcome the Leader of the House’s commitment to ensure that we have the motion on Monday. It has been a long time coming, but I think we are going to get there at last. This episode has been profoundly embarrassing for the Government; I do not know whether the Leader of the House shares that embarrassment. I do not know whether it was the
[Pete Wishart]

Whips Office trying to block this, but I will take the Government at their word. I welcome you saying, Mr Speaker, that if the motion is passed, proxy voting will be available the day after to Members of the House of Commons. Perhaps the Leader of the House can ensure that that is the case.

What happened to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) shocked the country. Our constituents could not believe that in the place where we design the legislation that deals with safety at work, we were prepared to put one of our colleagues at such risk. Our 19th-century method of voting has totally and utterly failed. The discredited “nod and wink” pairing system is in tatters and lies in disrepute. It has relied on trust, and clearly that trust has been thoroughly and fundamentally broken by what happened to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire.

The Scottish National party never believed in that system or trusted it. I am glad that we have been totally vindicated for never participating in pairing. As the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who chairs the Women and Equalities Committee, said, we have to do more to modernise this place. This is a good start, but it is only a start. We have to start to ensure that we look after people in this House who are ill, indisposed or cannot make it to this place of work. We have to start looking at the practice of putting people in cramped Division Lobbies, at risk to their own health. Many of us heard my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) talking about her claustrophobia in the packed Lobby last Tuesday. We have to get beyond that. We have to start making sure that this place looks like a modern, 21st-century Parliament.

This is good news, and I welcome it. I look forward to discussing this later with the Leader of the House, when we will hopefully get a clear indication about how this will be done. This is good work, but there is more to be done. Let us get a move on and make sure that this place is safe for the people who come to work here.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is taking this matter up with the Scottish Parliament, which also has informal pairing arrangements. I am interested to know what steps he is taking to ensure that it comes into the 21st century at the same rate as the Westminster Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the situation for the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). I can confirm that a pair is available for her, or, if she is on site during the day at any point before the vote, she will be nodded through, which means her vote will be recorded. That is the existing arrangement for those who cannot be here due to illness or other reasons. As I said last Thursday, I genuinely do not believe that any of her constituents would honestly require her to turn up here in a wheelchair when it was perfectly possible to receive the normal arrangements for people in this place with conditions. Members with long-term health issues were paired on that day.

I am genuinely delighted that we are making progress on this issue, but I urge all Members to recognise that we had 13 years of a Labour Government, with three female Leaders of the House, and we have had two Liberal Democrat Deputy Leaders of the House, and I do not believe that any of them brought in proxy voting. The Scottish Parliament has not brought in proxy voting.

Let us pause and have a moment of celebration. We are achieving something truly fantastic.—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) shouts that this is not my idea. I am certainly not claiming credit for it. I am asking Members to celebrate the House’s achievement and what we can do when we get together and collaborate.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am certainly celebrating the House’s achievement, just as I am celebrating seeing you break into a smile at the same time as the Leader of the House—it was like a parting of the clouds. You should try to do it more often; you work quite well together.

I thank the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House for closely involving the Procedure Committee in their work. This is good news. As Chairman of the Procedure Committee, I would particularly like to thank the Committee’s members for bringing forward a really good report that seems to have the House’s support.

Mr Speaker: I want to say—I do not think this is a divisible proposition—that the hon. Gentleman is an all-round wonderful human being.

Andrea Leadsom: I find myself entirely agreeing with you on that point, Mr Speaker, I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent and timely work of the Procedure Committee, which has provided a way forward on which I sincerely hope the House will agree on Monday.

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, there is a piquancy about the fact that, as we have been debating this important matter, a large number of children and young people have been observing our proceedings. Until a matter of moments ago, to boot, there was a young man up in the Gallery clutching a little baby.—[Interruption.] Apparently, it was the baby of the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith)—[Interruption.] Ah, on cue! We are grateful to him.

Those watching our proceedings will be pleased to know that the next Member to be called is the person who has done more to champion women and equality in this House than anyone any of us can recall: the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the Mother of the House, elected on 28 October 1982 and still in service here.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): Thank you for your kind words, Mr Speaker, but this has been a collective endeavour. First, I would like to pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who has been a champion of this for pressing reasons and reasons of principle. I thank her for securing this urgent question, and thank you for granting it, Mr Speaker. You have always been on the side of progress in respect of parents. As the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) said, you were a champion of the crèche here, and she explained why this measure is so necessary.
We must also thank the Procedure Committee and its Chair. As soon as the House passed the motion, the Committee cracked on with it and did a thorough and excellent job. Who knew how exciting the Procedure Committee was? I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). This is me railing ineffectively, but she had the idea that we should go to the Backbench Business Committee, to enable the Chamber to debate it. I thank the Committee for its role.

It is 31 years too late for me, but I am delighted about this, because it is really important. There are many babies of Members on both sides of the House in the offering. They are blissfully unaware of the Brexit debate, but these Brexit babies cannot wait, so I am delighted that we are getting on with it.

Finally, I pay tribute to the Leader of the House, who I am in no doubt has always been on the right side of the argument. I point out that I, too, was Leader of the House, and I failed to get this through. Whoever succeeds in these long decades of progress and these baby steps into the 21st century, all power to your elbow.

Andrea Leadsom: Of course, the right hon. and learned Lady’s baby steps in her day would now be teenage. She demonstrates what a wonderful Mother of the House she is by being so collegiate. I share her delight that this demonstrates what a wonderful Mother of the House Lady’s baby steps in her day would now be teenage. She into the 21st century, all power to your elbow.

I am in no doubt has always been on the right side of the argument. I point out that I, too, was Leader of the House, and I failed to get this through. Whoever succeeds in these long decades of progress and these baby steps into the 21st century, all power to your elbow.

Andrea Leadsom: Of course, the right hon. and learned Lady’s baby steps in her day would now be teenage. She demonstrates what a wonderful Mother of the House she is by being so collegiate. I share her delight that this has been a cross-House effort and that we have got to the point where we can take this forward, which will be great news for all those babies. The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), is sitting beside me with her youngster kicking away, obviously signalling some approval.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on women in Parliament, I want to say a great big thank you for this step forward. I would like to see more women in this Parliament, and it is the women who are, biologically speaking, more likely to need to take maternity leave.

As someone who served in a Parliament for eight years that did not have any proxy voting or pairing and who saw women have to fly all across Europe to vote, I urge colleagues not to throw away the pairing system. Pairing offers flexibility, especially if somebody is unwell or has an urgent family matter. It is a really useful system. It needs to be more robust. Let us respect it and keep that option on the table.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right; pairing has its uses. It is important that any parent on baby leave can choose to have either a proxy vote or be paired, if, for reasons of ill health or reasons associated with being a new parent, they do not feel in a position to make that decision. It is very important that they have the choice.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I join others in very much welcoming this important motion and the important step that is being taken. In the interests of keeping up momentum on the issue of reform, does the Leader of the House agree that, although this is a first step, what we really need in order to bring Parliament into the 21st century is electronic voting for all? I wonder whether she might explore that option.

May I ask the Leader of the House one question about the motion? I am sorry, but I have not had a chance to look at it yet. I know the Procedure Committee has suggested that there may be some exceptions where proxy voting would not be suitable in its view—for example, a decision on military conflict. I do not think I agree with it about that, but I am interested to know whether that is attached to the pilot that she is proposing.

Andrea Leadsom: I can say to the hon. Lady that this is a temporary Standing Order, and it follows the Procedure Committee’s view. I do not want to get this wrong: I know it will not apply to a closure motion, but it will apply to Government and private Members’ business. I suggest that the hon. Lady looks carefully at the Procedure Committee’s report for the finer details of exactly what is included and excluded.

The hon. Lady will obviously appreciate that the reason for making it a temporary Standing Order is so that the Procedure Committee can look at it after a year and decide, in hindsight, whether it is appropriate in scope, who gets to use it and who provides the proxy. In having such a pilot scheme, we will be able to address any residual concerns about its operation.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As many hon. Friends have said, people may wish to have a pair for other reasons, such as ill health or bereavement. The pairing system and its robustness seem to be in doubt, with an hon. Member coming in because they could not trust the pairing system, which is something none of us wishes to see. Will my right hon. Friend look at making this more robust, perhaps by ensuring that pairs are lodged in writing in advance—with you, Mr Speaker, the Leader of the House or whoever is thought to be appropriate—such that if someone votes in error, their vote can be discounted, thus restoring faith in the pairing system?

Andrea Leadsom: I think my hon. Friend makes a very constructive suggestion, and I will of course discuss it with other business managers. However, she will appreciate that the pairing arrangements are informal arrangements to accommodate people with a sudden need to be absent and so on. Therefore, as I said in answer to a previous question, there are occasions where the administration of them can break down. This is an extremely difficult thing to be absolutely 100% robust, but I know that the business managers are absolutely committed to making it as robust and reliable as they possibly can.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be back in the House and to be speaking because, as is quite topical in this discussion, I have just returned from six months away from this place to spend time with my new baby, Eli, who is up in the Public Gallery with my husband, Eli’s dad, Ben. I just want to thank the Government for honouring the pairing arrangements that they gave me during my six months’ leave. I feel I need to say that because that was not always honoured for all my fellow MPs who were also having babies around the same time.

Much has been said about pairing, and I want to put on the record that, while I thank the Government for honouring my pair, I would much rather have had the opportunity to vote—to vote by proxy—perhaps giving my vote to the MP for a neighbouring or nearby constituency who could cast my vote on my behalf,
because I was at home and I was following what was going on on BBC Parliament. I remember watching the debate in September, sitting, with baby Eli on my lap, just as my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) is doing right now. Today, she is watching this on BBC Parliament, with baby Raphael, and she knows what is going on, so if there were to be a Division, she could cast her vote.

I stress to the Leader of the House how important it is that proxy voting goes ahead, because I do not think that pairing alone really brings Parliament into what, let us be honest, is the mid-20th century in terms of workplace rights. If we want to get into the 21st century, we have much further to go as a House.

Andrea Leadsom: May I welcome Eli and welcome the hon. Lady back to the House? It is great to see her in her place. I completely understand and empathise with what she is saying, and I am delighted that we are bringing forward this motion.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is absolutely fantastic news that the House has come together to look at these much-needed changes. I pay tribute to my colleagues all across the House who have spoken about their experiences. My children are too old for this to be an issue for me. In my former life, before coming here, I was a human resources director, and I was the person responsible for writing policies. I say to the Leader of the House that I know how difficult it is to be in the right intentions, but sometimes there are unintended consequences and all sorts of things that we have never thought about. Please will she pay great attention to the pilot study, with the input of the Procedure Committee and everybody from across the House, so that we get a sustainable, long-term solution?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the importance of making sure that this is correct. That is why it is a pilot scheme for one year. I am confident that the Procedure Committee will do its job in making sure that we review all the positives and negatives during that period.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I would like to put on the record my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, for your personal commitment to the introduction of proxy voting, as well as to the cross-party effort and, of course, to the Mother of the House for pushing this with the passion with which she always pushes quality issues. Thanks so much to the Leader of the House for laying this motion on Monday.

To reiterate what we have already heard in this debate, I want to say from personal experience that pairing may be an option that people want to choose, but for me it was not enough, because my reputation was questioned in a newspaper in relation to why was I not here and why I had the second worst voting record in this Parliament. I want to say to the Leader of the House that the reason why she is going to do on Monday by laying the motion is so important—I hope we can get on with using this on Tuesday—is that Members should be able to have babies and have their vote registered. That is why proxy voting is such a massive step in the right direction.

Andrea Leadsom: I totally agree with the hon. Lady. I know that, in response to her raising this same issue during the debate we had a couple of months ago, the theyworkforyou.com website agreed to change what it was putting on its website about MPs who are on pairing arrangements because of maternity leave, so that it did not indicate that they were incredibly lazy. All of us expressed our disgust at the way she was treated in the press over that. It was a clear misunderstanding, and I hope that the new arrangements will ensure that will not happen in the future.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I am pleased to support the comments of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, on which I am privileged to serve. I welcome the Leader of the House’s response today, and I thank her for all the work she has done on this important issue. Today is good news indeed. Does she agree that this place has to keep pace with the modern world and that proxy voting will certainly help with this, although there is much more to be done?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know he did a job share with one of our hon. Friends who was on maternity leave, and it was very good of him to do that. I think all hon. Members are committed to dragging us into the 21st century, and it is quite right that we do that.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Last year saw a whole range of events in Parliament to mark the centenary of some women getting the right to vote, and this year marks 100 years since the first woman took her seat in Parliament. I was really proud to take part in a lot of those events last year, and I know a lot of progress has been made. Other Members have mentioned the House of Commons nursery, which enabled me to put myself forward for Parliament. I have placed on record my thanks to those who made that happen, particularly you, Mr Speaker. However, when we talk about wanting to have a more diverse Parliament and we have things such as the nursery, is it not a contradiction that we have not yet introduced proxy voting? Does the Leader of the House agree that it is long overdue, and that if we want to break down barriers to women entering Parliament, do we need to take this very swift action?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Lady, and that is why we are doing so on Monday.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I perhaps surprise you, Mr Speaker, by suggesting that I think this does not go far enough? I think that if this pilot scheme succeeds, as I hope and believe it will, it will probably pretty soon be extended to people who are unwell, because there are very strong arguments that people who are ill should be able to have a proxy for the same sort of reasoning that correctly underlies this one. However, does the Leader of the House agree that any
move to something like electronic voting would be a retrograde step? The reason why we vote in person—there are many reasons why, but one of the principal ones—is that we can get hold of a lot of colleagues, principally Ministers or shadow Ministers, at the same time in the same place every day. That is the reason why we would be cutting our own throats as Back Benchers if we were simply prepared to press a button and leave it at that. Let us do this for the categories that need it, but preserve the rights of Back Benchers to be able to nobile Ministers in the Lobbies, because that is what they need.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend demonstrates perfectly why some debate was needed before we decided to limit the proposal to baby leave and have a one-year pilot. Some Members argue that proxy voting should have a broader reach and include those who are ill or otherwise incapacitated. Clearly there are different views on how we vote, but those are for another day.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not wish to promote sibling rivalry, so I call Rachel Reeves.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I am the older sister, yet I have been called second today—we will be having words later, Mr Speaker.

I too thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) for asking this urgent question, and the Leader of the House for answering it. May I just check the procedure for Monday? Is the intention to table a motion that we can vote on, or will it be introduced at the end of the day, in which case there is a risk that one Member will shout “Object” and stop the proposal going through? I know that the Leader of the House is trying to do the right thing, but we are all keen to ensure that we have proxy voting in place by the end of Monday.

Andrea Leadsom: Having had three kids, I have discovered a very useful piece of information, which I wish now to share with the hon. Lady: the oldest child makes the rules, the second child is the reason the rules are needed, and the third child the rules do not apply. She is absolutely right to raise this issue. We have debated proxy voting a number of times and want to get on with it, so the plan is to bring it forward for the House to nod through. She is therefore quite right that if somebody objects, I will need to look at further measures, which I will do in very short order. This is the quickest way to get it through. Following that, as you have said, Mr Speaker, you will ensure that the detailed procedures are ready immediately thereafter. That will then need to be signed off by you, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Scottish National party’s Westminster team. Once those signatures have been received, it will be possible for proxy voting to take place on the next sitting day.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for that useful clarification. For the avoidance of doubt, if it is necessary for me to trog around the offices of the individual party leaders in order to secure those signatures, I shall be happy to do so.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Trog?

Mr Speaker: Well, toddle then.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I wish you well in your toddler endeavours. Mr Speaker, although I hope that is not necessary, I associate myself with everything the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) said and welcome the excellent announcement by the Leader of the House. I declare an interest, as my wife and I are expecting our first child in just over six weeks’ time, so I might be making an early application. With regard to the one-year trial, how will that work ahead of a birth? I am keen to take advantage of proxy voting post birth, but for those of us who represent constituencies far from London—if I am in the Chamber after 5 pm, I cannot physically get back to Moray until about noon the following day—will there be an opportunity not only to share the first few days of their child’s life, but to be there for the birth?

Andrea Leadsom: I am happy to discuss this with my hon. Friend in more detail, but the idea is that the normal rule will apply so that the two weeks of parental leave for fathers under proxy voting would be available from the birth. However, there is equally an expectation that it might be necessary to take that at another time, so that can also be facilitated, under the terms of the Procedure Committee’s report, which I encourage him to look at in detail. He and I can then discuss the matter further.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I am thrilled and associate myself with all the thanks to all the people who have already been thanked many times, including the Leader of the House. I am certain that someone will try to object on Monday, so I am going to drop what has been quite a pleasant and collegiate discussion so far. Would she like to join me in warning that I will personally make a misery of the lives of anyone who comes in here on Monday and objects, based on their patriarchal, paternalistic, draconian and old-fashioned sensibilities? What does she think is the likelihood of this getting through on Monday? I would also like to say that it will not just be me making their lives a misery; it will be me and my feminist army.

Andrea Leadsom: What I can say to the hon. Lady is that I absolutely believe her—I do not think anyone would doubt her for a moment. Anyone who is even considering objecting should beware.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I welcome this statement. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is right that the absent Member should choose the name of their proxy, rather than the Whips, and that they should have an absolute right to change that name upon giving written notice that they wish to do so?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point, and that is indeed the intention.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am pleased to subscribe to the feminist army of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips); I will be a proud member and glad to serve. Will the Leader of the House confirm that if somebody does shout “Object” on Monday, the motion will fall? It is unacceptable that one male Member of this House can override the
overwhelming will of everybody else in this place just to get their own way, and on an issue that will not even affect them. Will she give that serious consideration? What will she do to ensure that such Members do not play silly games on Monday night, given that babies are expected sooner rather than later in this place? What else will she do to implement the findings of Professor Sarah Childs’s report “The Good Parliament”, which has been far too long in the implementing?

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Lady will know, it is for individual Members to examine their consciences and act accordingly. I sincerely hope that all hon. Members will support the motion. It is clear that there is huge support for it across the House. As I have said, in the event that somebody does object, I will look in very short order at what I need to do to bring it back again for the House to reconsider. With regard to Sarah Childs’s report, the hon. Lady will be aware that these matters are not entirely for the Leader of the House: they are matters for the House, and the Commons reference group is a cross-party group. I am always keen to hear from right hon. and hon. Members and would be delighted to discuss it further with her.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I hope that I can be counted as a member of the feminist army of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). When I entered the House in 1979, it was a horrible place to have a family. We had about 19 women MPs and it was totally family-unfriendly.

Andrea Leadsom: I think that the whole House enjoyed and concurred with the hon. Gentleman’s remarks. He does a very good job of showing himself to be a feminist, and those of us who join that brand of feminist determined to make the House a more modern place welcome his views with open arms.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Today is a good day at the office. Although we are taking a small step forward, it is important. I want to push the Leader of the House a little further on the point that the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) made about whether, after the pilot of a year, other groups may be considered suitable for proxy voting. I think particularly of people who are seriously ill, perhaps with cancer, and undergoing treatment but who want to register their vote in the House. During the pilot year, could work be done on that, ready for the end of the pilot, to see whether proxy voting needs to be extended further?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point. As we have discussed in the two debates and several urgent questions on this in recent months, some people believe that proxy voting should be extended, but nevertheless, there is cross-House agreement that the pilot should be restricted to baby leave, which covers a critical and unique period of life. However, I agree that, once the Procedure Committee’s review is under way, we should consider whether other matters should be included.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome the Leader of the House’s statement. It starts to reduce the perception that the mother of Parliaments is frozen in time; although of course, if a Member shouts “Object” on Monday, that perception will be reinforced. Will she join me and others in all parties who campaign for other reforms, such as ensuring that there is adequate seating in the Chamber for all Members, electronic voting and, indeed, job sharing for Members of Parliament?

Andrea Leadsom: I am always interested to hear hon. Members’ views. I would be happy to discuss that with the right hon. Gentleman. But he will realise that such change would require the whole House to concur with his ideas for reform.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I know that the Leader of the House wants proxy voting to happen. I am a member of the Procedure Committee and I say to all Members that procedure is fun—never more so than in recent months.

Chris Bryant: You’re sad!

Chris Elmore: Indeed, I am sad. I ask the Leader of the House, in all sincerity, if, as I fear and perhaps she fears, the proposal does not go through on the nod on Monday, how soon will she bring back a substantive motion with a vote? The following day, we are expecting votes on Brexit legislation, which means that my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who has a new-born baby, could lose out again. I am sure that the right hon. Lady agrees that that is simply not acceptable.

Andrea Leadsom: I have certainly made it clear that the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) should be able to spend critical time with her baby, and I sincerely hope that she will avail herself either of nodding through, or a pair in the event that proxy voting is not available. However, as I have said, in the event that somebody regrettably decides to object on Monday, I will table a substantive motion as soon as possible.

Chris Bryant: As it happens, I do not have children, although I was told categorically by an eight-year-old in Ton Pentre school last week that I have two sons, aged two and six, which goes to show that the internet is not always accurate. Perhaps it was another Chris Bryant.
All my friends in the House who have children say that the most useful thing for them is certainty about when votes will be held and when the end of the day will come. Of late, we have had a lot of Tuesdays and Wednesdays that have gone later than 7 o’clock, and we do not have any certainty about whether the proposal will be accepted next Monday. I urge the Leader of the House to think again about whether it is possible to have a 45-minute or hour-long debate on Monday, with a vote at the end so that we have a guaranteed chance of getting this through. While we are talking about certainty, many parents are uncertain because there are rumours that there will no longer be a February recess during half-term. Will the right hon. Lady make it clear whether that will happen?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will know that the House has agreed its recess arrangements in February. It is a matter for the House, but I have no plans to change that. I have tabled the motion for Monday and I sincerely hope that it will be successful.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I be another to congratulate the Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) and all others who have finally succeeded in overcoming the forces of reaction? However, in all candour, doing this on a nod or nothing basis on Monday night simply risks affording the dinosaurs the opportunity to bring the Chamber into disrepute one more time. A 90-minute debate is all it would take and surely there must be availability in Government time for that.

This obviously comes too late for my children. My sons were four years and 10 weeks old when I was first elected, and the modern working environment would have made a big difference to us. However, the guilt and the conflicts do not end when we come back from maternity or paternity leave. There is another good 20 years at least to look forward to in that respect. While we have the wind at our back for once on such issues, can we start looking at other ways in which we can make this somewhere that parents can find their place in the nation’s affairs? That should apply not just to parents who choose to raise their family in London, where the question of whether a vote is at 7 or 8 o’clock will make a big difference, but those who choose to raise our families in other parts of the country, especially in relation to sittings in school holidays.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman makes some serious and well-received points. I agree that it is extraordinarily difficult to be a parent in this place. I reiterate that we need to see what more we can do and that I am always delighted to hear from any hon. Member who wants to discuss specific, constructive suggestions that might carry the will of the House to make us a more family-friendly Parliament. It is vital that we enable more people from more diverse backgrounds, particularly with families, who want to express their views and make the world a better place, to be Members of this Chamber.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Mother of the House also deserves great credit for the way in which she put forward, as the equality Minister in a former Labour Government, a raft of measures to level the playing field between men and women in the workplace, some of which eventually had the support of my former boss, Lord Hutton. Can the Leader of the House suggest ways in which the House could encourage more fathers of new-borns to take up shared parental leave to level the playing field between male and female MPs?

Andrea Leadsom: I would like to think that, when the motion is passed, new fathers in this place will want to be role models for other men throughout the country by taking parental leave and demonstrating the importance of fathers in the lives of their new-borns and in supporting new families. I sincerely hope that all male MPs who have new-borns will take advantage of that opportunity.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I commend your efforts, Mr Speaker, and those of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for getting us to this point. I also commend the Leader of the House, who I know has met great resistance from some of her crustier colleagues. We cannot allow those crusty colleagues—we know who they are; the Leader of the House knows who they are—to shout “No” on Monday, so I encourage the Leader of the House to go to them and ensure that much pressure is put on them so that the proposal gets through. I say that as someone who is fortunate in that my son, Finlay, was born in the summer recess, so this would not necessarily have applied to me. Will the Leader of the House explicitly highlight how new fathers will be affected so that we too can take on our responsibilities at home properly?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman may know that one of my hon. Friends spoke in one of our earlier debates on proxy voting about timing the birth of her baby in the summer recess. The baby was conceived to be born in the summer recess—fine-tuning the event specifically so that she would not have the problems we have discussed. I absolutely understand the challenges that new families in this place face. The hon. Gentleman asked what will be available to new fathers. It will be proxy voting for the two-week parental leave available to fathers—that is what is proposed for the pilot scheme. For mothers, it will be six months of proxy voting, again in line with the Procedure Committee’s proposals.

Mr Speaker: I thank all colleagues and reiterate my thanks to the Leader of the House for her work and commitment, which are apparent to everyone. We are not quite there yet, but we are closer than we were, and we hope that the matter will be resolved on Monday. Let me be the first to say thank you to her from this Chair for what she has done.
Green Deal (Conduct of Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Ltd)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.20 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to review the conduct of Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Ltd in relation to the Green Deal; to require the Secretary of State to report on the merits of a scheme guaranteed by Her Majesty's Government to compensate persons mis-sold loans under the Green Deal; and for connected purposes.

This private Member's Bill should not be required. First, it is a consequence of a Government-backed scheme failing. Equally, since the mis-selling scandal became apparent, the Government accepted the responsibility to investigate and to compensate victims, this Bill would be redundant. To date, however, the UK Government have turned a deaf ear to such calls, so now I stand here having to reiterate the call for a UK Government review. I pay tribute to the work of others in the UK and my constituent Irene Harris; and to Citizens Advice, particularly Linda Corbett from the Kilmarnock bureau.

As the title of my Bill suggests, one company in particular has been at the centre of the mis-selling activity: Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems—HELMS for short—and campaigner Irene Harris; and to Citizens Advice, particularly Linda Corbett from the Kilmarnock bureau.

I will contact the relevant authorities, but that again shows how, had the UK Government taken a lead in regulating the installations, such antics might have been stopped by now. Considering HELMS was previously fined £200,000 by the Information Commissioner's Office, that latest activity reconfirms Skellen's brazenness. I support the ICO call for it to have the power to fine such company directors up to £500,000.

I will now cover the main failings and use them to set the terms for a Government review aimed at making recommendations with regard to compensation. First, the length of the loans needs to be considered. I can only conclude that such loans were a cynical manoeuvre by HELMS to reduce the annual repayment figure below the predicted first year savings, as per the golden rule.

We are told that the PV panels should last for 25 years. As a civil engineer, however, I have undertaken whole-life costing exercises, and it was normal to allow for mechanical and electrical equipment to be replaced at a maximum interval of 15 years. It therefore beggars belief that HELMS cowboy installations will last those 25 years. Also, long-term maintenance costs need to be considered. Was any of that factored into the golden rule? I have previously stated that the actual savings need to be assessed against the theoretical savings, now that we have the installations to measure that against. That needs to be done on a year-on-year, whole-life basis, not just on that first year. On the expected savings, sadly, enough HELMS examples show that electricity bills have increased, not decreased, so again why are the Government sitting back on such matters?

As well as the adequacy of long-duration loans—the high volume of which should have been a governance red flag—the review should consider the age profile of those taking loans and their ability to pay back in the long term. Spend-to-save projects should have a payback period of a few years, not a quarter of a century.

We need a proper root-and-branch review into the HELMS installations. How many households do not have the building warrants that HELMS was supposed to procure? Those without warrants should be compensated against the retrospective charges that are set in law. How many installations are wrongly wired to the meter or connected to the wrong meters? Remedial action should be taken, also at no cost to the householders. How many people have insulation cladding with no building warrant? Where necessary, intrusive testing should be undertaken to prove it is suitable and, again, any remedial works should be compensated. Given that this was a Government-backed scheme, it is not surprising that so many people were trusting.

That takes us to the hard sales tactics. Again, the Government need to review that and to take proper evidence. Given the use of the Government logo and no money required up front, it is easy to see how unscrupulous salespeople could easily conflate matters to the extent that the installations seemed to be completely free. Some customers might already have had free insulation through the energy company obligation, which of itself could have added credibility to the free concept. Even for the ECO, however, we actually all pay for it via our
energy bills, so that shows the risks of the Government pretending that measures are free—just like the free smart meters, which we all actually pay for.

The review should also check aftercare and assess how many installations are correctly insured. My constituent Irene Harris says that her insurance is no longer valid. How many others are there like that, and what are the associated risks? There has been a blasé attitude about the fact that those loans are against the property and are not personal loans as though somehow that means the length of the loan does not matter. Well, it does matter. The Government should see that 20-plus years of outstanding loans, no insurance and no building warrants mean that those houses cannot be sold. People are trapped in houses that might not suit their long-term housing need. The review must identify the scale of that problem.

We need to know how many people have been defrauded of their feed-in tariff. In answer to a parliamentary question from me, the Government confirmed that they do not have that information on whose tariffs have been transferred to a third party. It is vital to find that out and to find ways to prevent Skillen from continuing to profit from such fraudulent transfers. It is undisputable that people did not realise that they were assigning their tariffs over to his other company. Worse, many people claim that their signatures were forged. The UK Government need to get a handle on that and to ensure that victims get ownership of the tariffs.

The Government might argue that an appeal process is in place, but that is inadequate. People need to know that they have been ripped off. They then need to set that out to the Green Deal Finance Company, which might make an offer which is associated with a non-disclosure agreement, which smacks of divide and conquer. Worse, many of those people will not be in a position to assess the merits of an offer made to them, and they will feel further stressed by the whole situation.

Sure, if people are not satisfied, they can appeal to the BEIS Secretary, but that process is so tortuous. The last data I had stated that the Department had only made decisions on two out of 79 appeals and well over half of those had been in the system for nine months or more. That shows the limbo that people are left in. It has taken 15 months for my constituent Irene Harris to receive an offer, one fewer than for the original made by the Green Deal Finance Company. Where does that leave her? It is further proof that greater transparency is needed.

If the Government do not step up to the plate on those matters, we will never know the real extent of the problem. People will continue to discover at a later stage that they cannot sell their homes; many will not get the feed-in tariffs that they should be getting; others will overpay on their electricity bills, possibly for the rest of their lives; and incorrect installations will remain in place. Some of the Government architects of the flawed scheme have been rewarded with peerages and knighthoods. Are those matters what we want the legacy of the green deal to be, or will the Government step up to the plate, support my ten-minute rule Bill, conduct a review and properly compensate the victims?

Question put and agreed to.
Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill
Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 3

Obtaining or viewing material over the internet

2.31 pm

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:
Lords amendment 2.
Lords amendment 3, and amendment (a) thereto.
Lords amendments 4 to 11.
Lords amendment 13.
Lords amendment 16.

I inform the House that the Speaker has selected amendment (a) to Lords amendment 3 tabled in the name of Stephen Twigg.

Mr Wallace: After that jovial urgent question on proxy voting, I feel like some purveyor of doom, as the Security Minister, having to break the positive note, for we are dealing here with some of the most serious issues facing our society. At the outset, however, I would like to thank Members across the House for their work to improve the Bill and for their cross-party approach to nearly all parts of it. If our security and counter-terrorism policies are to be successful, they must bring with them as many people as possible.

Many of the Lords amendments follow up on earlier debates on the Bill in this House and accordingly I trust that they will command the support of all Members on both sides of the House. I will focus my remarks on the substantive amendments. Clause 3 updates section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000 to make it clear that it is an offence for a person to view or otherwise access via the internet information likely to be useful to a terrorist. Although section 58 as currently drafted includes a reasonable excuse defence, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) argued in Committee for greater certainty for those who might have a legitimate reason for accessing terrorist material. The Government had previously offered assurances that those legitimately engaged in journalism or academic research would be covered by the reasonable excuse defence, but to provide further reassurance, Lords amendment 1 makes this explicit in section 58.

Although the designated area offence received widespread support when it was inserted into the Bill on Report in this House, the shadow Security Minister said at the time that it would need further scrutiny in the House of Lords. Their lordships lived up to their role as a revising Chamber and proposed amendments to clause 4. Initially, the Government could not support all of them, but on reflection we agree that they do improve the operation of the new offence. The designated area offence is designed to establish a clear ban on travel to a tightly defined area or areas outside the UK, where such a ban is necessary for the purpose of protecting the public from a risk of terrorism, with a criminal sanction for breaching that ban.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, but if someone goes to a designated area, their reasonable excuse will have to cover all their activities. If they say they are going as a doctor but also commit a terrorist offence or crime, that reasonable excuse will effectively fall away. Everything they do will have to be covered by the reasonable excuse; they are not de facto lifted out of having committed an offence. It is important to understand that going to a designated area with a legitimate reason, such as aid work, and then engaging in some other activity will not prevent them from being in breach of statute and therefore guilty of an offence.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I seek clarification. In previous debates, I understood the designated area approach to mean that just being there would create an offence, but in his response to the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), the Minister seems to be suggesting that the prosecuting authorities would have to find evidence not just that the individual was there but that they were doing something other than what they said they were doing.

Mr Wallace: The original offence always required a reasonable excuse. The right hon. Gentleman will be a supporter of the European convention on human rights.

Of course, people have certain rights to travel—to visit family or carry out certain other important activities, for example, and the House would consider the restriction of such activities to be a very serious matter. We have to bear it in mind that people travel legitimately. We are not in the business of drawing a circle around somewhere and saying no one is allowed in. That said, someone would have to have a reasonable excuse and present it so that it can be tested and investigated.

Their lordships have said—and I agree—that there are legitimate reasons for entering war zones. Among others, I am thinking of aid workers and Crown servants working for the UK Government or the United Nations. They would have legitimate reasons for being there, and we do not want to shut those off to people, but we do want to make sure they have a reasonable excuse. As is often the case in legislation, however, there was some concern about whether to have an exhaustive list, and risk missing something, or an indicative list, and we have opted for an indicative list.

Some people are concerned about the delivery of humanitarian aid—an amendment on that has been selected today—but I have made sure that the reasonable excuse of delivering humanitarian aid is tempered by the provision in proposed new subsection (3E) in Lords amendment 3 that “the reference to the provision of aid of a humanitarian nature does not include the provision of aid in contravention of internationally recognised principles and standards applicable to the provision of humanitarian aid.”
That provision is there because, as we have seen before I am afraid, terrorist groups sometimes use humanitarian aid as cover to go somewhere. Ignoring recognised principles, they pick those to whom they deliver the aid and carry out other offences while doing so. By taking that approach, we preserve the freedoms we believe in while sending a clear message that there are areas we do not want people to go to and that going there could in itself become an offence.

We are all struggling in the west to deal with the emerging threat of foreign fighters as failed state safe areas are becoming the routine. Members on both sides of the House rightly get angry when foreign fighters come back and we cannot prosecute them because gathering evidence of deeper and more complex offences is very challenging. We have looked at the Australian and Danish models and found the designated area offence along with a sunset clause and review—it is not indefinite—to be one of the best ways to send a strong message to our constituents that going off to fight in these places is either a terrorist offence or not to be encouraged.

I do not want young people in my constituency going to fight whether for glory or in the commission of terrorist offences, or for anything else; I want them to realise that, however seductive the grooming on the internet, it would turn into a horror story if they went. Also, we do not want young people going out, being trained in terrorist techniques, coming back and posing a threat. In response to the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), I simply say, however, that the offence must reflect the freedoms we hold dear. We instinctively find it a challenge to restrict movement in this country—we do not like it, and why should we? It is a freedom we enjoy.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): As the Minister will recall, some of the concerns that I expressed during the Bill’s earlier stages turned on the issue of free movement within this country, particularly for UK citizens moving from one port to another. In some cases there had been a casual appropriation of former anti-terrorism provisions whereby no suspicion was required, yet people were challenged and checked as to whether they should be travelling. The Minister honourably indicated that he would engage with me on the issue, and he has done so on two occasions. May I ask him whether he has now formed a conclusion on how we can obtain information, so that there is time to check people before they leave the country.

One reassuring fact is that the vast majority of checks carried out under schedules 3 and 7 involve people who are returning rather than leaving, so there is less disruption than there is when someone is going off for a holiday, for instance. However, I give the hon. Gentleman an undertaking to ensure that the figures are published in September, and I shall then be happy to discuss the issue with him further.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): May I briefly return the Minister to the list of reasonable excuses? Will he confirm that it would not be up to the prosecution to prove beyond reasonable doubt that they did not apply, but that a person defending a charge would be required to produce some basic evidence that they did apply?

Mr Wallace: Yes. That is important. Someone who claims to be an aid worker or a doctor will be expected to prove that. It is not possible simply to pick one of the excuses and use it as a defence. We should expect it to be necessary for the police to investigate any case in which a person returns from a designated area, to establish whether that person may pose a risk to the public, or whether they fall outside the offence by virtue of travelling for one of the specified purposes or can otherwise rely on a “reasonable excuse” defence.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): If a person from this country were to go to one of the prohibited areas and then come back, would it be automatic for that person to be picked up if he or she had not been given permission to do something there? Is it possible that the security services—which, I presume, fully support this measure—would say, “Let him or her run, because it is more in our interests to watch what they do”?

Mr Wallace: As I think my hon. Friend will know, when it comes to intelligence and investigations, such decisions are operational. Should our police or intelligence services suspect that someone has committed an offence but there is nevertheless more to discover, that is a risk that they will have to take. They will take it into consideration and make a decision. Of course, any prosecution under the Crown Prosecution Service must meet a number of thresholds. It must be established, for example, whether the prosecution is in the public interest, or whether there is a likelihood of success. However, if someone does not provide a reasonable excuse, that person is potentially open to prosecution and to being sentenced to up to 10 years in prison.

It is regrettable but a fact of life, given the challenges posed by end-to-end encryption, secure communications, and the ability to obtain evidence from people who we may know from intelligence—but not in evidential space—have been up to no good, that we must seek a way and the ability to obtain information, so that there is time to check people before they leave the country.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman has made some very valid points. Provisions in schedules 3 and 7 to the 2000 Act relating to intra-UK travel allow people to be stopped and checked without suspicion. I think that one of the best ways in which we can prevent abuse of that tool is to publish figures. I told the hon. Gentleman at a recent meeting that in September I would publish figures showing how many people had been subject to such checks while travelling within the United Kingdom, and I think we can start that process of opening up.

I also think that if any of our constituents are subject to such checks, we must always ensure that the police do their work in a manner which is timely and considerate, and which secures the best results for them and the individual who has been stopped. That is not a matter of legislation, but a matter of handling things sensitively. Perhaps we should also be more efficient when it comes to obtaining information, so that there is time to check people before they leave the country.
We want it to deliver a strong deterrent to ensure that people are where they are for the right reasons, and to make clear there are other ways to better people’s lives in their communities than going to a designated area for reasons that may turn out to be spurious.

To ensure that the power to designate an area is used proportionately, Lords amendment 5 provides that regulations designating an area will automatically cease to have effect after three years. That will not, however, prevent further regulations from being made to designate the same area should such a designation still be required to keep the public safe from the threat of terrorism.

2.45 pm

In its original form, the Bill extended extraterritorial jurisdiction to four further terrorism offences in order to ensure that individuals could be prosecuted in the UK for crimes committed overseas. During its passage, the Government identified two further terrorism offences to which extraterritorial jurisdiction should be extended, namely the offence of inviting support for a proscribed organisation and the new offence of recklessly encouraging support for a proscribed organisation, provided for in section 12(1) and (1A) of the 2000 Act. Lords amendments 9 and 10 amend clause 6 to that end, while Lords amendment 11 limits the extraterritorial jurisdiction in respect of those offences, and the offence in section 13 of the 2000 Act, to UK nationals and residents. That limitation addresses the concern expressed in the Lords that it would be unjust for a non-UK national or resident to be prosecuted in this country for activity overseas in support of an organisation that was not proscribed in the country where they lived, or where the activity took place.

Lords amendment 13 would require the Home Secretary to establish an independent review of the Government’s strategy for supporting people who are vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism, namely the Prevent programme. The hon. Member for Torfaen has acknowledged the excellent work undertaken under the programme. He and his colleagues in the Lords have argued that it is simply a question of good governance to review regularly whether policies and programmes such as this are working as intended, and are as effective as they can be. Essentially, that is the purpose of the post-legislative reviews that have now been in place for some years.

The review of part 5 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, which provides the legislative foundation for the Prevent programme, is in any event due to take place early in 2020, just 12 months away. Given that, I have decided that the time is now right to initiate a review of Prevent. Communities across the country are behind the policy and are contributing to it because, like us, they want to protect their young people from being groomed and exploited by extremists.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to hear what the Minister is saying, and I commend the work of my Front-Bench colleagues—and those in the other place—who have pushed for it. Does he agree that this is also the perfect time to look at, in particular, the issue of far-right and extreme-right groups? Obviously Prevent already addresses it, and does some excellent work—I have regular contact with my local police force about that—but does the Minister agree that we need to do much more to tackle organisations such as System Resistance Network and Radio Aryan, of which he is well aware, and which spew out hate and bile?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman has been a good campaigner on that issue, which he has brought to the attention of the Home Office on a number of occasions. One of the reasons why I think this is the perfect time to review Prevent is that I truly believe that if the public knew how much it does in respect of the far right, there would be more support for it, not less. It is having significant success. Half the Channel cases involve the far right. The work that has been done over the last two years clearly shows that Prevent is not about a particular group or ideology, but is similar to other forms of safeguarding that are carried out every day by our social workers, teachers and police.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): As far as I can see, those far-right organisations are winning the hybrid war against society. Will the Minister talk a wee bit about what his Department is doing to curb the extremely dark channels of money that are coming in from around the world and funding far-right extremism here in the United Kingdom?

Mr Wallace: Terrorist financing, including of the far-right group that was proscribed 18 months ago, is worrying because actually it is not as high as people imagine. In the day of the internet, people can be groomed and inspired for very small amounts of money. Indeed, the five main terrorist attacks of 2017 cost £5,000 in total. That is the reality of a modern-day terrorist attack and the financing behind it. I do not see much evidence of huge swathes of money funding it; what I do see is growing evidence of the impact of the internet in allowing people to join up who in the past had nowhere to go. They may have been the oddball or odd one out in their village, but they now have the ability to live in a fantasy world, indulge their bigoted beliefs, learn how to make bombs and damage and hurt people, and find kindred spirits across the internet. That is what has given one of the big boosts to terrorism, including far-right terrorism.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): What conversations has the Minister had with social media companies to try to get terrorist material removed from the internet?

Mr Wallace: The UK was the first country in the world to set up a counter-terrorism referral unit. It is in the Met police and has taken down over a quarter of a million pieces of material from the internet. It has been around for some years now and has been a great success, very quickly getting on to the internet and content service providers. We have also done extensive work alongside them to get them to improve their response, and we are going to go further: the online harms White Paper, a joint Home Office and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport document, will be out imminently, and in it we have said that we will look at everything from voluntary measures all the way through to regulation.

It is incredibly frustrating as the Security Minister to proscribe a far-right organisation only to find that its
hateful website or its allies are spouting rubbish and bigotry from, for example, the United States, protected under one jurisdiction. That is incredibly difficult to have to deal with.

**Sir Edward Davey:** I thank the Minister for the fact that the Government are not opposing amendment 13 made by the Opposition parties in the other place; that is very welcome. He was talking about the review he will undertake as a result of that amendment. Can he tell us a little more about the remit and timescale of the review? Perhaps he was about to do that anyway, but it would be helpful to have that on the record.

**Mr Wallace:** We have not formed the terms of reference. The timescale is six months; within that period we will appoint an independent reviewer. I am incredibly happy to take suggestions on that from all parts of the House, from both the Back Benches and Front Benches, and I will be happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss his ideas. I am pleased that this will give the critics of Prevent the opportunity to produce evidence, because time and again we have to spend time knocking down allegations without any evidence behind them. I will look forward to them producing that evidence as part of the process.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): The Minister is making some very thoughtful comments. Will he accept that any strategy must not further isolate or alienate any minority communities that continue to face an increase in discrimination and hate crimes? It is therefore particularly welcome that the Government have conceded and we are to have this independent review. Will its findings be brought back to this House for scrutiny, as the Minister pointed out?

**Mr Wallace:** The hon. Gentleman is right: this will be a public review and we will be able to debate its results in the House and ask for contributions from colleagues and members of the public and groups alike.

Prevent was started by the hon. Gentleman’s Government and I believe it is on a successful flight path. It has diverted hundreds of people, both on the right and Islamist extremists, from the Channel programme back into the mainstream. It is not perfect; not everyone responds to the work that is done and they have to volunteer into the Channel programme. It is high risk, and Labour will inevitably be sitting on the Government side one day and they will carry that risk as well. It is not perfect, and it is better received in some communities than others. I do not mean that in terms of religious communities; I represent a seat that covers north Preston, and Labour will inevitably be seen as a party that does not support the work of Prevent co-ordinators, suppliers and community groups, and other colleagues who come with concerns.

It is the right time to do this. I started publishing statistics as Minister as I was keen to ensure they were out. We have done two years of statistics and they show clearly that it is not a mass spying operation: there have been 7,000 referrals compared with 621,000 for safeguarding, child abuse and domestic abuse. Also, the proportion of people diverted out of the programme are the same as in other safeguarding areas and in the last few years over 300 people have received help on Channel and stopped being a concern in the future. That is 300 people who could have posed a very real risk to our constituents, so I am proud of where we have got to, but am also very open to improving it and moving it forward.

**Stephen Doughty:** Programmes like Prevent and Channel are needed because of the grooming the Minister was talking about a few moments ago. I was pleased to hear what he said about the joint work between his Department and DCMS, particularly with regard to online content, because he will be aware that I am very concerned about online broadcasting and online radio stations, particularly Radio Aryan, which has been exposed by BBC Wales, *The Mail on Sunday* and the excellent work by Hope not Hate. Will the Minister undertake to look specifically at that issue, because it is producing some vile content that will undoubtedly draw people into far-right and extreme right-wing activity?

**Mr Wallace:** The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. In protecting people from being groomed and exploited, we all have concern about three main areas. In communities, we need to make sure that people are not groomed by radicalisers and not seduced once they have latched on to what they have seen on the internet from online preachers or elsewhere. That is why the Prevent programme is there. There is also the question of the cause of what drives people to feel that they are lesser or outside the support of the state, which is why we need to do a lot more around Islamophobia; we must challenge Islamophobia. It is happening; it happens in Lancashire and around the country, and if we do not tackle it as a Parliament and a Government it will give some cause and grievance that will be used to recruit people. We probably all dealt in the past in our inboxes with ridiculous BNP-sponsored emails about veterans getting less than an immigrant, with photographs of soldiers and comments like “This veteran gets nothing, but the immigrant gets more,” which turned out to be complete fiction. We must work on that, and where there is a genuine grievance we must make sure it is not hijacked by those who want to exploit that into terrorism or violent extremism.

There is also the question of the method of delivery of grievance and grooming, which is the internet. We need to make sure that Ofcom works alongside the Government, but it is of course independent and can make its own judgments. Organisations like Ofcom are there to regulate what is being broadcast to us. The last stage is what part of this legislation does—recognise that where legislation is written for broadcasters and the internet, it moves with the times. Often when Ofcom has banned people they have flipped on to Facebook and launched a broadcast channel, without any controls. So we must be much more agile to do that.

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I apologise for not being present for the start of the Minister’s speech. I listened carefully to what the Minister said about how little money there is, but it is plainly obvious that money is being moved around. Some of this terrorism is coming back from organised crime, particularly in the Province of Northern Ireland. While we look at the technical stuff and the nitty-gritty of what goes on to
prevent terrorism like that in Londonderry the other night—the bravery of our police and armed forces and security services is there to be seen—the explosion did take place and we need to do more to prevent such explosions.

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend knows about these challenges from his own experience. In some parts of Northern Ireland terrorism is entirely ingrained in organised crime, with the money and control of the community organised crime seeks to exert. The Criminal Finances Act 2017, which I took through the House about two years ago, brought in measures that will be very useful for combating illicit finance, whether it is being used to finance terrorism or organised crime. That legislation is being extended to cover Northern Ireland, which will allow us to get to grips with some of the godfathers who have helped to fund that terrorism in the first place.

3 pm

I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Torfaen, and with the rest of the House to get the review of Prevent right. I also look forward to ensuring that the offences in this part of the Bill help to empower our law enforcement and security services to deal with the growing threat of safe spaces abroad. We must send a strong message to those who wish to travel to become foreign fighters that they should not do so and that there are alternatives, such as Prevent, that can help to divert them away from committing those offences, but that if they do commit them, they will be caught and sent to prison.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the Security Minister for his opening remarks, and for his tone and the consensual approach he has taken. We most definitely do not agree on everything, and we try to work together constructively on these serious matters whenever we can. I am grateful to him for accepting Lords amendment 1 to clause 3, which has caused controversy in the past. The clause deals with a situation in which it was previously illegal to download these terrible recruiting videos but not illegal to stream them. We have to have a situation in which both are illegal. We cannot have a situation in which watching something later on is illegal but watching it at the time is not. This has been difficult to deal with, and there is no perfect way to capture it in legislation.

As the Minister knows, I was also concerned about the three clicks approach, and I am pleased that the Government have dropped it. Dropping it has not, as some suggested, led to a situation in which one click could lead to an offence being committed. The Bill sets out clearly that anyone inadvertently clicking in that way would not be covered by the offence. I was concerned that the reasonable excuse defence mechanism went put on to the face of the Bill, particularly in relation to journalists and academics, and I am pleased that the Government have now accepted those concessions. It is clear that in the years ahead we will have to look at precisely how the clause works in practice, but it is important that we send a clear message that streaming these terrible videos is equally as awful as downloading them and watching them later on.

On designated areas, the Security Minister quoted what I said in the Commons because this measure was introduced at a very late stage and I was unable to have that discussion with him in Committee. We do not oppose the overall aim of dealing with so-called foreign fighters, but the clause needed significant work. Again, I am pleased with the work that has been done and I pay tribute to my Labour colleagues in the Lords and those of other parties there who have put in the work and time to improve the clause. I am also grateful to the Minister for accepting the changes.

There was originally a non-exhaustive list of reasonable excuse defences on the face of the Bill. This has essentially been taken and carved into the law itself, so that people do not commit the offence in the first place if they have a particular purpose for travelling. That was important for two reasons. First, someone with a perfectly legitimate reason for doing something would inevitably have been stopped, and would have been able to raise the reasonable excuse defence only further down the line. It is therefore much better in principle that they do not commit the offence in the first place. Secondly, the last thing anyone in this House wants is to deter people with a perfectly reasonable motive from going to areas of conflict. Aid workers are an example, and I know that the Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) has tabled an amendment on that.

For completeness, Lords amendment 3 states that the offence is not committed if one or more of the purposes of the visit is to provide

“aid of a humanitarian nature…carrying out work for the government of a country other than the United Kingdom…carrying out work for the United Nations or an agency of the United Nations…carrying out work as a journalist…attending the funeral of a relative or visiting a relative who is terminally ill…providing care for a relative who is unable to care for themselves”.

That is not meant to be an exhaustive list.

In addition, the reasonable excuse defence is maintained. This relates to the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby. The reason is that if no exception is already carved into the law and the purpose of the visit is not included in the list, it could none the less appear as a reasonable excuse defence. In an intervention on the Minister, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) talked about a burden in these cases. With the reasonable excuse defence, there is of course a burden on the defendant to raise it, but the burden to disprove it lies with the prosecution. In the carve-outs in the law that I have suggested, however, these people would not be committing the offence in the first place.

I want to press the Security Minister on how exactly this is going to work in practice. As he knows, there are two models around the world: the Australian model, which I think the sunset clause has been taken from, and the Danish model. The way the Danish model works in terms of not committing the offence in the first place involves an extensive system in which people obtain licences before they go. That is not without its problems, because journalists sometimes like to travel to certain areas without advertising the fact that they are doing so, so I am not suggesting that this would be a silver bullet or a magic solution. However, there will presumably have to be a system whereby we can show clearly that someone has not committed the offence in
the first place, as against those situations in which there might be a reasonable suspicion that an offence had been committed and in which the reasonable excuse defence was raised later. Any details from the Minister on how this will work would be appreciated.

The other Lords amendments on these issues are also important. They include the introduction of a sunset clause for the statutory instruments to designate particular areas so that they cease to apply and have to be replaced. This will ensure that the Government regularly make the case to Parliament if they wish to continue with a designation in the long term. Lords amendments 7 and 8 relate to two additional concessions. Lords amendment 7 provides that the Government have to make a statement outlining why they believe an area needs to be designated at the same time as they lay the relevant statutory instrument. Similarly, Lords amendment 8 states that when the Government revoke a designation, the change must be subject to the negative resolution procedure in Parliament in case anyone wishes to object to it. Taken together, the amendments produce a much better clause in relation to the designated areas. It will allow the Government to tackle the problem of so-called foreign fighters, of which we are all conscious, but it now does so in a more balanced, fair way, without deterring those who wish to travel to areas of conflict for perfectly honourable and legitimate reasons. No one in the House would wish to prevent them from doing that.

There are three other broad themes to the amendments in this group. The first relates to extraterritorial jurisdiction, which the Minister will be aware I have raised before in a slightly different context. The Government added extraterritorial jurisdiction to the offence of inviting or recklessly expressing support for a proscribed organisation, and concern was expressed about that by the Joint Committee on Human Rights. The Committee was concerned that the extension of extraterritorial jurisdiction to certain offences was problematic when there was no equivalent offence in the country involved. The safeguard will now ensure that extraterritorial jurisdiction applies only if the offence was committed by a UK national or UK resident. That is in line with what the Joint Committee recommended, and I welcome that change.

Turning to the independent review of the Prevent strategy, I genuinely welcome the Security Minister’s acceptance that a review is required, and I give credit to the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who has argued for one for some considerable time. As the Security Minister knows, I have visited Prevent programmes across the country, including in south Wales. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) also raised the issue of far-right terrorism, which this House must be conscious of and take action on.

My argument about the independent review of Prevent is that there is a concern that its aims may end up in conflict with or become slightly confused between intelligence gathering, what I would call the more welfarist or safeguarding aspect of Prevent, and community cohesion. There has been an issue around community cohesion, because the facilities that are available to local authorities, for example, are an important part of that. I have had conversations in which it was clear that the pressures on local authority services are really affecting Prevent’s ability to deliver.

There are also aspects or parts of our society—in fairness to the Security Minister, he pointed this out himself—that have lost faith in the programme, and it is time to look at that. We need a programme in which everyone can have faith. None of us wants to see people living a life of violence and hatred that is driven by these kinds of ideologies. We all want to prevent people from doing that, but let us do so in the most effective way. From our conversations, I am hopeful that the Security Minister will be keen to have a wide-ranging review that can deal with such issues.

While I am on the subject of Prevent, I know that the competition to become the new independent reviewer of terrorism legislation has now closed to applications, and I hope that someone new will be appointed soon. I hope, too, that the Minister will be receptive to suggestions about how exactly to construct this independent review, so that we can have the most robust and reliable conclusions possible and, if necessary, make appropriate changes.

Lords amendment 16 is another sensible amendment, relating to bank accounts or terrorist’s bank accounts. There was an issue in the law as originally drafted in that the account would have to be in the name of a particular person. Of course, that did not take into account the fact that people can have control of other people’s bank accounts by their behaviour; and it is important that that was covered in the legislation as well.

Taken together, all the Lords amendments make this legislation far better, and it is pleasing that we end the passage of this Bill on a note of significant consensus.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) about the consensual approach taken by the Government during the passage of this Bill and about the concessions already made during earlier stages, including on the likes of the three-clicks provision. As the Scottish National party has said since this process started last June, we welcome the Government amending this important legislation and appreciate the need to combat the constantly evolving threat from international terrorism in the modern age. However, we must be extremely careful how that is executed, and any new powers must be subject to stringent checks and safeguards if we are to maintain a healthy balance of security and civil liberties.

I will deal with the amendments in fairly short order lest I repeat many of the points already made by the Labour spokesman today or points that either of us made during earlier stages. The SNP welcomes the amendments—the improvements—made to the Bill in the other place and, as an SNP Member, I say that through gritted teeth. However, most of the amendments made in the other place were argued for in one way or another by the hon. Member for Torfaen and myself throughout the passage of the Bill in this place. None the less, I am pleased that the Government have dropped their opposition to many of the additional safeguards, and I hope the Minister is as generous in his treatment of the Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Bill on Report and Third Reading next week.
As we have heard, clause 3 extends section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000 to make it an offence to view or access material online of the kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing a terrorist offence. Such offences are subject to a reasonable excuse defence which, as has been outlined, includes situations in which a person did not know and had no reason to believe that the material that they had accessed was of such a nature. However, Lords amendments 1 is in line with the amendments tabled previously and would provide that a person who views or possesses such material for the purposes of carrying out work as a journalist or for academic research would have a reasonable excuse defence. We may still be criminalising the innocent curious, and there are potential issues with social media and online algorithms that may push content an individual’s way, but we welcome the further protections afforded by the amendment.

Clause 4 provides for a new offence of entering or remaining in a designated area overseas. Again, the offence is subject to a reasonable excuse defence. Lords amendments 2 to 8 seek to introduce several safeguards to the operation of the new offence. In particular, Lords amendment 3 provides that a person does not commit an offence if they enter such an area involuntarily or for providing humanitarian aid, satisfying an obligation to appear before a court, carrying out work as a journalist or for academic research would have a reasonable excuse defence. We may still be criminalising the innocent curious, and there are potential issues with social media and online algorithms that may push content an individual's way, but we welcome the further protections afforded by the amendment.

3.15 pm

Mr Wallace

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I would not like him to think that we ordered the review because we do not think that the strategy is safeguarding people. He refers to the fact that we must do much better based on his meeting with Safaa Boular, who by the way was convicted of planning a proper terrorist plot, no matter how nice she may have been in the detention centre. The reality is that the strategy has safeguarded hundreds of people away from violence and has been proving a success, so I would not want him to leave an impression that it has not. Of course, I agree that, like all schemes, it does not work for every single person, but it has had considerable success in all our constituencies.

Gavin Newlands: I do not dispute anything that the Minister has just said, but there is a huge clamour for review because of the inadequacies of the Prevent strategy, as seen by many in the community. His points about the terrorist plot, and so on, are well made, and I do not dispute them for one second. I am not arguing that Safaa Boular should not have been punished or put in prison; my point is about the fact that she was radicalised in the first place.

Yes, we need legislation that gives the police everything they need to fight serious crime and terrorism, but the Government should bear in mind that this Bill is, in many respects, deeply controversial. They must get it absolutely right, and that will be impossible without a full, independent review—that review has been hamstrung by the Government before it starts. I ask that the Opposition be consulted on the terms of reference, to which the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) alluded earlier, and on the timescale for that consultation.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak to amendment (a), in my name, to Lords amendment 3. Two years ago, in the space of just six months, we saw five terrorist attacks here in the United Kingdom: the Westminster attack, Manchester Arena, London bridge, Finsbury Park and Parsons Green. Those attacks killed 36 people and remind us all of the very real and continuing threat of terrorism here in the UK. Indeed, we were reminded of it again just last weekend by the latest terror bombing in Northern Ireland.
We know there are people living in fragile states across the world who face this threat daily. Last week, we saw the appalling attack in Nairobi, which killed 21 people, and in western and central Africa, we have seen the appalling terrorist activities of Boko Haram, notably in Nigeria. Earlier this month, more than 9,000 people had to flee Nigeria for Cameroon after such an attack.

The whole House is united in our condemnation of terror, in extending our condolences to all those who have lost loved ones to terror and in our debt of gratitude to the emergency and security services. These appalling acts, both here and in other parts of the world, underline the need to update existing powers to respond better to the threat of terrorism in the modern age, which is why I support the Bill.

I am grateful for the changes that have been secured, and I pay tribute to the Labour Front-Bench team, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), to the shadow Home Affairs team and to others on both sides of this House and in the House of Lords. The Bill’s consideration has served to make significant changes that have improved the Bill. I particularly welcome Lords amendment 3, tabled by my noble Friend Lord Rossler and agreed by the Lords, and my amendment (a) relates to that amendment.

As has already been explained, the Government’s original approach was to introduce a “designated area” offence to give the Home Secretary the power to designate all or part of a country as forbidden to UK nationals and residents. If an individual is charged with the offence and they are not able to prove that they have a reasonable excuse for entering or remaining in the designated area, they could receive a sentence of up to 10 years in prison. The only original exemption was for Crown agents, and there was widespread concern that that could have unintended consequences for a number of categories of people, including United Kingdom citizens who work as aid workers.

Lords amendment 3 was made to reverse the burden of proof by introducing a number of specified purposes that are excluded from the scope of the new offences. I absolutely accept the urgent need to tackle the real issue of so-called foreign fighters, but in doing so, it would be wrong to have the unintended effect of deterring people with perfectly legitimate purposes for travelling. The amendment refers to those working in the humanitarian field and to journalists, which is a truly significant improvement in protecting UK nationals who have legitimate reasons for travelling abroad. I am particularly concerned that, without this amendment, there might not be sufficient protection for aid workers and for the organisations that employ them, which could have a devastating effect on the provision of vital humanitarian aid.

Non-governmental organisations, led by BOND—British Overseas NGOs for Development—have been urging this House to accept Lords amendment 3 because it exempts individuals involved in the provision of aid of a humanitarian nature. In December 2018, the chief executives of 22 organisations signed a statement calling on the Government to introduce an exemption for aid workers and others with a legitimate reason to travel to a designated area.

I am delighted that the Government, on reflection, are content with Lords amendment 3, but the purpose of amendment (a) is to urge the Minister to go a little further and add a number of additional specified purposes. Lords amendment 3 refers to those working to deliver “aid of a humanitarian nature”.

I am concerned that, defined narrowly, this could unnecessarily limit the activities that are considered legitimate, which is why my amendment would extend that list. First, it would cover work on a development project or programme. That could be a long-term programme to deliver health or education, or one that promotes women’s economic empowerment. Secondly, and importantly, it would cover work on a peace-building project or programme. Peace building is defined by the United Nations as:

“A range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development.”

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend raises an important point. Churches often go on aid missions and peace missions, so it is important that we get the legislation right because otherwise, as he says, it could have unintended consequences. Those are two important points.

3.30 pm

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Church and other faith-based organisations are often involved in peace-building activities.

I will give some examples of the sorts of things that could be covered by peace building. It could include mediation and dialogue activities to negotiate local ceasefires or broker peace talks, support for local communities to strengthen early warning schemes or civilian protection efforts and initiatives to deal with the legacy of violence and promote social cohesion so that peace is built. DFID’s single departmental plan has as one of its five objectives strengthening global peace, security and governance, and DFID seeks to spend about half its investment in fragile states. In November last year, the Department doubled the UK’s commitment to the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund as part of a long-term strategy to build global peace and prosperity by tackling the underlying causes of instability.

Bob Stewart: In my experience, a Department such as DFID will sometimes send in a project team to do peace building or peace making, or to build a hospital. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we might also have to consider bodyguards, because a private military company might be involved in protecting DFID’s people when they go into a war zone? Has he considered that as part of his amendment?

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Aid workers—whether directly employed by DFID or other donor countries, or employed by other non-governmental organisations or private contractors—require security arrangements in precisely the sorts of countries that we are discussing. That is an important part of the aid effort, and therefore it is, as he suggests, covered by my amendment.

My concern is that the term “aid of a humanitarian nature” does not explicitly include such peace-building programmes. I fear that without a clear exemption,
there is a risk that peace building could be at the mercy of interpretation on what constitutes a reasonable excuse. This is a relatively low-profile area of international activity, so I think there is a risk that it may not be widely understood. I note that, as the SNP spokesman rightly said, on Third Reading in the other place Earl Howe for the Government said:

“In the absence of such an exemption the Government are clear that entering and remaining in a designated area for the purpose of engaging in peacebuilding would constitute a reasonable excuse.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 15 January 2019; Vol. 795, c. 141.]

That commitment is welcome, but I think the risk remains that were such a case to come to court, juries might not have a full understanding of peace building and might not understand it to be covered by the concept of humanitarian activity. I do not think anybody in this House would want the Bill to have the unintended consequence of deterring NGOs from going into conflict areas or post-conflict areas. I urge the Minister, if he gets the chance to do so in responding to the debate, to give a commitment to the importance of peace building. Ideally, he will do so, as per my amendment, by adding this activity to the list of specified purposes. Alternatively, he could make it explicitly clear today that peace keeping is covered by the term “aid of a humanitarian nature”, and he could reflect that in the policy guidance.

Finally, let me refer to human rights monitoring. Rightly, the Bill now refers to “carrying out work as a journalist” but my amendment seeks to extend the provision to cover those who are undertaking human rights monitoring or advocacy. The United Nations defines human rights monitoring as seeking “to gather information about the human rights situation in a country or region over time through readily available methods, with the goal of engaging in advocacy to address human rights violations.”

That is dangerous and incredibly important work. Without human rights defenders on the ground, injustices too often go unchallenged, and the most marginalised and vulnerable people have little protection from abuses of power. Those who work in the field of human rights monitoring and advocacy often put themselves in grave danger to shine a light on the abuse of power. I believe they have a right to know that when they are conducting that important work, they have protection in UK law that recognises their legitimate reasons for travelling to such designated areas.

I finish by saying that although it is fundamental that we strengthen our legislation to tackle terrorism, it is important to ensure that when we do so, we do not inadvertently undermine the very values that terrorists seek to attack. We have a proud record as an open, outward-looking country that does not turn away when it witnesses injustice. It would be sad if the Bill had the unintended consequence of limiting the contribution of our own citizens to development programmes, peace building and human rights monitoring in some of the world’s most fragile states. Although I will not press my amendment to a Division, I hope that the Minister will consider the points that I and others have made about this and will, even at this late stage, consider accepting my amendment.

Sir Edward Davey: It is a real privilege to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg). But he pressed his amendment, I would have voted for it. I agree with everything he said in his general remarks and with what he said about the real challenge being to balance security and the need to tackle people who threaten our way of life with the protection of the values that make our way of life. He made that point specifically by building on the progress that we saw made in the other place with Lords amendment 3, which is very welcome, and I hope the Minister will cover that point in his response to the debate.

This House should thank Members in the other place because, as we heard the Minister say, they strengthened the legislation in several areas. They particularly strengthened it in respect of concerns that I and others had about civil liberties and freedoms, to make sure that innocent people were not inadvertently caught by some of the new offences that will be created. Lords amendment 1 in particular makes it absolutely clear—to be fair to him, I think the Minister had this in mind—that journalists and people doing academic research will have extra special protections.

We have talked about Lords amendment 3, but Lords amendment 13 on the review of the Prevent strategy—I intervened to ask the Minister about it—is really welcome and will support the Prevent strategy in its objectives. Both today and when we have discussed the matter before, the Minister has rightly said that there are a lot of good things about Prevent, and I agree with him. One of my concerns, which was why I supported the case for a review, was that some of the people who criticised Prevent gave valid criticisms, which I hope will be taken on board during the review, and others made the point that whether or not Prevent was doing the right work and whether or not it was successful, it had lost the trust of some communities. I hope the review will support the work that the Government rightly want to do by rebuilding trust. The review can play a positive role in the meeting of the objectives that I think we all share in this House.

One issue that did not find favour in the other place relates to something the Minister said about proscribed organisations. My colleagues in the other place wanted to see whether there could be a relatively regular review of the list of proscribed organisations. Indeed, Lord Anderson, who is well known and has huge experience in this policy area, said he believed that at least six of the organisations on the proscribed list really should not be there. I hope I can tempt the Minister to say, if he feels able to, whether a process of review of proscribed organisations already goes on somewhere and, if not, whether he would favour one, either specified in the Bill or dealt with outside it. I hope he will look into that, because it would be helpful and welcome.

In closing my brief remarks, let me just say that it is good that the Government have either agreed to accept the amendments made in the other place or to come forward with concessions.

John Woodcock: Far be it from me to be a discordant voice in this House, but I have real concerns that the House of Lords have not strengthened the Bill and may have fundamentally weakened parts of it, particularly in respect of the terror travel ban, which, as I said earlier, I have been campaigning for the Minister to adopt for well over a year.
I do not know whether you have had a chance to see the British satirical film “Four Lions”. Madam Deputy Speaker, but it recounts the exploits of four hapless British wannabe jihadists from my home city of Sheffield, who are determined to wage jihad. The film opens with one of them getting an invitation to attend a wedding in Pakistan. He knows full well that there is no such wedding, and in fact he and his friend are going over there to be part of a jihadi training camp in the Pakistani mountains.

Although that film is fiction and satire, that excuse is commonly used by people who are overwhelmingly suspected of going over to areas with high levels of jihadi activity to train as foreign fighters, with the potential to then bring that training, knowledge and extremism back to British shores. The whole point of the designated area offence was to make that more difficult. I fully endorse the push of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) to get official recognition for aid workers and journalists. I recognise that there would be a total outcry if someone who verified themselves as a legitimate journalist or aid worker were captured by this legislation. I find it almost impossible to concede that that would happen if they were in fact genuine, but if the measure does give reassurance to development agencies and to members of the fourth estate, I can understand it and agree that it is a good thing.

However, I have real concerns about the list of family excuses, which will surely prove incredibly difficult to disprove once they have been stated. Now that they are up in lights in the Bill, it will become that much harder to bring any prosecutions, and that much harder to deter people from travelling to become foreign fighters, which is, of course, what the legislation is intended to do. It is supposed not to catch people once they are there, but to deter them from travelling in the first place. Clearly, I am in an unusually small minority in this House in expressing that view, but I fear that we will come to rue agreeing such wide-ranging and easy-to-fake excuses in the Bill, and we may need to return to it in future months and years.

Finally, let me just say a word on the review of Prevent. It is of course right that any Government should seek periodically to review flagship parts of any policy. Certainly, in the critical area of preventing extremism and preventing terrorism gaining a grip in our own communities, I very much hope that this review is possible, and that it becomes that much harder to do. The problem with this list, there is judicial discretion; holes are found, and we have to disprove once they have been stated. Now that they are up in lights in the Bill, it will become that much harder to bring any prosecutions, and that much harder to deter people from travelling to become foreign fighters, which is, of course, what the legislation is intended to do. It is supposed not to catch people once they are there, but to deter them from travelling in the first place. Clearly, I am in an unusually small minority in this House in expressing that view, but I fear that we will come to rue agreeing such wide-ranging and easy-to-fake excuses in the Bill, and we may need to return to it in future months and years.

Mr Wallace: With the leave of the House, I will respond to the points of hon. and right hon. Members. First, let me address the amendment. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) made a passionate and well-articulated case for adding peace building to the list of reasonable excuses. His example is at the heart of the challenge—peace building is most needed in fragile states, but it is in fragile states that foreign fighters emerge and safe spaces are constructed for that very reason. Effectively, the two sides of this challenge are summarised by peace building. It is therefore important to say that, first, the list is indicative. As long as I have been in this House, there has been debate about whether we have judicial discretion and about not doing too much in primary legislation. Lawyers in this House will be well used to that. The more comprehensive the list, the less room there is for judicial discretion. With no list, there is judicial discretion; holes are found, and we become subject to a different interpretation by judges every time. The word “indicative” is key. This is an indicative list. The major reasons listed are the headline reasons why the vast majority of people go to these places. They are clear, but still broad enough to cover most of the areas that concern us.

3.45 pm

Top of the list of subsection (3B) is obviously paragraph (a)—
“providing aid of a humanitarian nature”.

There are numerous definitions, both at the UN, and no doubt within our own Department for International Development, where humanitarian aid is defined in law, whereas peace building has a broader interpretation. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) has been a soldier on a peace building mission. I have been a soldier on operations, where you peacebuild with a gun in your hand. So it is a broad definition. I believe that the indicative list plus “reasonable excuse” should give the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby the comfort that peace building—as Earl Howe said in the other place—would be recognised as a reasonable excuse. Peace building would be viewed as a reasonable excuse. But of course, like all the issues listed here, the “reasonable excuse” would have to be proffered and then proved—proved by the prosecution, who would have to prove that someone was not a doctor, or that someone’s idea of peace building was not peace building.

Interestingly, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) used the example of the “Four Lions” film, which is actually tragic rather than a comedy. The tragedy is in the waste of life and so on. When the characters go out for the wedding, they do not go to a wedding. It would not be a hard excuse to disprove; I do not think they actually attended a wedding. It is qualified within the list. The “reasonable excuse” would have to be tested by the prosecution.

Bob Stewart: So, if a person wishes to go to a designated area, that person should, perhaps on Foreign Office advice, be told, “That is a designated area; you need to declare it.” If that person declares it prior to his or her going, that is good. If they do not declare it, and they go there and are picked up on the way back—it might be a mistake, but it might not—is that what the Minister anticipates might happen?

Mr Wallace: The decision that we took around this offence is that it is not a permission—something that you obtain in advance. As the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) pointed out, in the Danish system one effectively gets a licence. The problem with
that is that people just get a legitimate licence, and then go and carry out their other mission. It is then administratively burdensome. It also becomes a barrier to travelling for those who are doing so for a genuine reason, because they would have to check in with the state beforehand. We are proposing that people can go, but that if we have a suspicion that they have been doing something, we will test their “reasonable excuse”, and if the “reasonable excuse” fails, they will be guilty of the offence. We believe that to be the best way.

The hon. Member for Torfaen said that journalists would not be able to advertise where they were going. Many are based in theatre and do not know where they are about to go. They might be based in Lebanon and choose to visit—as some have—foreign fighters in detention in Syria. We shall not set up a permissions system; it is simply that you will have to declare it.

To clarify, the list of specified purposes is an exhaustive, not an indicative list, but there is power to add to the list by regulation. To give some reassurance to the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, let me say that we will review the operation of this in conjunction with the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office, to see how it works, and we will of course be open to adding to the list if there were such issues as he represents. I am confident, however, that genuine peace builders would have a reasonable excuse and would not, therefore, be subject to the committing of an offence.

To give the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness some reassurance let me say that these excuses do not exempt a person from committing the offence if all their reasons for being out there are not covered by the “reasonable excuse.” You cannot say, “On Monday I am a peace builder; on Tuesday I am a terrorist.” That will not exempt you from that offence. You have to be there specifically and entirely for a reasonable excuse.

Stephen Twigg: I thank the Minister for his response, particularly for what he has said about the potential for review and the ability perhaps to make additions at a later stage. I also thank him for speaking into the record what he has just said about genuine peace builders, which is immensely helpful. I understand that some sort of policy guidance will be issued once this Bill is enacted. May I encourage his Department to look at the reference to peacebuilding in that policy guidance?

Mr Wallace: I would be delighted to look at that. I also remind the hon. Gentleman that the Crown Prosecution Service has a role in this. It will test not only the validity but the interest of prosecuting in this area. We do not risk people being wrongly prosecuted by organisations not being on the list as it is, by the time the process has been gone through. While the individuals may not be totally at fault, the prosecutor will be, as will the judge who will test the proposition of the prosecution. I do believe that we should be confident about that. However, I give the hon. Gentleman the undertaking that I will keep it under review.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) made a good point about best practice. My experience of visiting Prevent around the whole of the United Kingdom is that it is better received in some areas and better delivered in others. It is absolutely the case that Prevent works very well in some areas, depending on the different communities and who the Prevent champions and community leaders are. He made very good points about community cohesion in Scotland. We are, absolutely, happy to look at that to see what lessons are to be learned. At the heart of his point, he is absolutely right—best practice is going on. I do not want us to throw out Prevent because of a few failing examples, or examples that do not actually exist when tested. We need to build on it and show where it is a success, and we must not be frightened to say, “Look, it is working”, if that is what the reviewer decides. But of course it can be improved. We improve Contest every few years. We do not hold that the Contest strategy overall is absolutely stuck, and therefore we make sure that we move it on.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) talked about proscription. He will know that Lord Anderson made this suggestion. I met former Lord Chief Justices and a number of Members of the House of Lords on the issues. The Lords, including those on the Labour Front Bench, rejected the amendment. It is quite easy to request that an organisation is looked at and de-proscribed. It only takes a letter from someone to say, “Will you consider de-proscribing this organisation?” In doing so, they are effectively immune from being prosecuted. If they say, for example, “I do not think this organisation should be proscribed because I support it”, and send the letter in, the process starts. That is already open to people.

However, the legislation around proscription is not as straightforward as some people think. We often proscribe groups overseas. In fact, since I have been Security Minister, we have de-proscribed groups that I had frankly never heard of until we did so. They were way overseas somewhere. For example, we de-proscribed one of them so as to assist peace building in a country that was a fragile state so as to allow that process to progress. It is not as straightforward as I think some in the House of Lords had thought it was going to be. A lot of the proscription legislation came around the time of the Northern Ireland Good Friday agreement. We should be mindful about what automatic de-proscription, or automatic reviews, may unlock not so far away.

It is important that we reflected on the issues. We rejected the proposal as there is a solid mechanism already in place whereby people can ask to de-proscribe and call for a review. That is why the House of Lords rejected it, and we are not going to seek to replace it here.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.
Lords amendments 2 to 11, 13 and 16 agreed to.

After Clause 16

PERSONS DETAINED UNDER PORT AND BORDER CONTROL POWERS

Mr Wallace: I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 12.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to consider Lords amendments 14, 15 and 17 to 42.

Mr Wallace: This group of amendments relates to the new port and border powers in schedule 3 to the Bill to tackle hostile state activity, as well as to the existing
counter-terrorism ports powers in schedule 7 to the Terrorism Act 2000. I will focus my remarks on the substantive amendments.

During the passage of the Bill through this House, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) has pressed the Government on whether there is an alternative to the power exercisable in exceptional circumstances for a police officer to be in the sight and hearing of a consultation between an individual detained under schedule 3 and their solicitor. While the Government were clear that safeguards were needed to prevent the right to consult a solicitor from being abused, thereby potentially putting lives at risk, the hon. Gentleman argued that such a provision would undermine the principle of confidentiality of consultations between lawyer and client.

On Report in September, I undertook to consider the issue further. Where there are concerns about a detainee’s chosen solicitor, Lords amendments 35 to 37, 39 and 40 would allow a senior police officer to direct that the individual consult a different solicitor. In practice, that is likely to be the duty solicitor. This provision is modelled on the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984—PACE—code H and reflects the suggestion made by the Law Society in response to the consultation on schedule 3 before my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary issued the code of practice last year. The change will apply to persons detained under both schedule 3 to the Bill and schedule 7 to the 2000 Act. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that this change adequately addresses the concerns that he raised.

Lords amendment 25 provides for a procedure to enable the urgent examination of a detainee’s property, including confidential journalistic or legally privileged material, in cases where there is an imminent threat to life or significant injury, or where there is an imminent threat of a hostile act being carried out. In such cases, the police must be able to act with immediate effect and, consequently, the usual process whereby any such examination must be approved in advance by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner cannot apply.

These Lords amendments to schedule 3 would instead allow an examining officer, with the approval of a senior officer, to examine a detainee’s property before a decision has been made by the commissioner. Under this procedure, authorisation would be required to be given or withheld by the commissioner or a judicial commissioner after the event. Where the commissioner withholds authorisation, he would have the power to direct that the property be returned and that information taken from it, including copies, is not used and destroyed.

As with the existing process provided for in the Bill, the commissioner’s decision will be taken after consideration of any representations made by affected parties, and there will also be an opportunity to appeal that decision where it has been delegated to a judicial commissioner. That approach is consistent with the Court of Appeal’s judgment in the case of Miranda, where the Court recognised that there might be a need for “post factum oversight in urgent cases”.

Further details of the process for examining retained property, including where it contains confidential material, will be set out in the schedule 3 code of practice, which must be debated and approved by both Houses before the provisions in schedule 3 come into force. These Lords amendments improve the provisions in the Bill, and I commend them to the House.

At present, the schedule 7 code of practice requires that an individual examined under schedule 7 is informed of their rights on first being detained. There is analogous provision in the draft schedule 3 code of practice. The Joint Committee on Human Rights suggested that this protection for detainees is sufficiently important that it should be provided for on the face of the Bill and not left to a code of practice. The Government were content to accept the Joint Committee’s recommendation, and Lords amendments 33, 34 and 38 provide for that.

Lords amendments 41 and 42 respond to a recommendation from the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee. The Committee argued that the regulation-making power in paragraph 53 of schedule 3 is too widely drawn. Under that power, the Home Secretary must specify additional categories of persons with whom information acquired by an examining officer may be shared. The Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee pointed out that this regulation-making power places no limitation on the categories of persons who could be specified for those purposes, including an organisation in the private sector. Lords amendment 41 narrows the schedule 3 regulation-making power so that it can be used only to specify persons carrying out public functions, and Lords amendment 42 makes a similar change to the Terrorism Act 2000. I commend these amendments to the House.

4 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I again welcome the approach that the Security Minister has taken in reaching consensus on these matters.

First, and this is a very important principle, in this Bill we have maintained and preserved the right to receive legal advice in private. It is a very important principle and, as the Security Minister knows, I pressed him on it at a very early stage of and throughout the proceedings on the Bill. There was a concern either that someone who had been stopped and detained would use the ability to contact a lawyer to communicate the fact that they had been stopped—in other words, to contact someone who was not a lawyer—or, alternatively, that a genuine lawyer was contacted but that the lawyer would then somehow, inadvertently or otherwise, pass on information about the stop. I pressed the Minister on the solution that is now in the Bill at quite an early stage about a kind of duty solicitor scheme that could deal with both of those concerns, but also ensure that we preserved the very important right of legal advice in private. I am pleased that we have reached this stage on the Bill and that the Government have made that concession.

I now turn to a set of Lords amendments, starting with Lords amendment 14, on the urgent procedure for retaining and copying property at the border. I have looked at the Court of Appeal judgment in the David Miranda case. As the Minister says, the judgment, at paragraph 96, identified that there is “no provision for authorisation by a court or other independent and impartial decision-making body in a case involving journalistic material prior to the use of the Schedule 7 power or, in an urgent case, immediately after the obtaining of the material pursuant to the exercise of the power.”

I fully accept that there are going to be very urgent situations, and this is expressed in terms of an imminent threat of loss of life or of injury. I am pleased to hear
what the Minister has said about the code of practice, which we can look at in due course. I previously suggested that there could be situations where a decision maker was available at the end of a telephone line, but I appreciate that there will be truly exceptional cases. The key to this is that, while I fully accept the law needs to be brought into line with what has been suggested in the Miranda case, we have to understand that these must be truly exceptional cases. That is something we can set when we come to debate the code of practice, being very clear that in these particular circumstances there will have to be a genuine, imminent threat that needs to be dealt with. Again, however, bringing the law into line with what the Court of Appeal has suggested is, on the whole, to be welcomed.

I want to speak to two other sets of Lords amendments. I will start with Lords amendments 17, 19, 26, 28 and 29 on the definition of hostile activity. The difficulty is that if this is defined purely in terms of criminal activity, that does not capture other types of hostile espionage activity, which may not necessarily bring into play parts of the criminal law. I did think that there was a danger of this being drawn too broadly, and I am pleased that these amendments narrow the definition, so that when we talk about threatening the economic wellbeing of the UK, we have now added “in a way relevant to the interests of national security”.

The key is to ensure that we have the powers we need while also being precise about what we consider “hostile activity” to be. It is a welcome amendment that improves the Bill.

Finally, Lords amendments 41 and 42 relate to information sharing. Schedule 3 provides that an officer questioning someone at the border can hand over information to appropriate bodies, as decided by the Secretary of State. I think that narrowing the provision to bodies exercising public functions is to be welcomed, but I have regularly made the point to the Minister during the passage of the Bill that bodies such as local authorities will need the appropriate resources, expertise and support to handle the information, particularly when it is likely to be highly sensitive.

Taken together, I think that the Lords amendments that I have spoken to, covering the four themes I have referenced, make the Bill a better and more effective end of our considerations, but it will potentially have a huge impact on the effectiveness of much of this legislation. One of the greatest threats to our national security and counter-terrorism capacity is Brexit and the risk of losing seamless access to multilateral information-sharing tools. Terrorism and organised crime will continue to operate after 29 March without care towards the UK’s membership of the EU—I see that the Minister is delighted by the mention of Brexit. Yet without Europol, Police Scotland will no longer have access to information systems, support and expertise that help make Scotland, the rest of the UK and Europe a safer place. We cannot risk having arrangements that dilute the access that we currently have, and any new arrangements must consider Scotland’s distinctive criminal justice system in order to provide a continuing basis for the direct co-operation that currently exists between law enforcement agencies in Scotland and their counterparts. If we have not made provision to keep our policing effective outside the EU, how can we expect Prevent and everything that has been discussed today to work even after a review?

I am sorry to have to mention Brexit so close to the end of our considerations, but it will potentially have a huge impact on the effectiveness of much of this legislation. One of the greatest threats to our national security and counter-terrorism capacity is Brexit and the risk of losing seamless access to multilateral information-sharing tools. Terrorism and organised crime will continue to operate after 29 March without care towards the UK’s membership of the EU—I see that the Minister is delighted by the mention of Brexit. Yet without Europol, Police Scotland will no longer have access to information systems, support and expertise that help make Scotland, the rest of the UK and Europe a safer place. We cannot risk having arrangements that dilute the access that we currently have, and any new arrangements must consider Scotland’s distinctive criminal justice system in order to provide a continuing basis for the direct co-operation that currently exists between law enforcement agencies in Scotland and their counterparts. If we have not made provision to keep our policing effective outside the EU, how can we expect Prevent and everything that has been discussed today to work even after a review?

I thank the hon. Member for Torfaen and the Minister for the manner in which the Bill has been debated throughout its passage and I look forward with joy unconfined to dealing with them again next week on the Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Bill.
Sir Edward Davey: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). He tempts me to talk about Brexit—[Hon. Members: “Go on!”] In relation to security and counter-terrorism, of course, Madam Deputy Speaker. I share his concerns that that has not been dealt with adequately. The political declaration is far too weak on the subject and that concerns me. If we got that right, it would go much further than the Bill can.

On border security, which the amendments cover, I was slightly amused that some of the points I made on Report, about which the Minister was not happy, had been dealt with in the other place. I pay tribute to my noble Friend Lord Paddick, who, in discussions with the Minister in the other place, clarified a point in the legislation in a very helpful way. I am grateful to the Government for conceding that point. I was concerned about the Bill’s definition of hostile activity to include anything that threatened the United Kingdom’s economic wellbeing. Although I clearly do not want anyone to threaten the United Kingdom’s wellbeing, it seemed a broad and unspecific definition. Some people would say that Brexiteers threatened the United Kingdom’s wellbeing, but I do not want to take that too far because that would be controversial. However, I was pleased that the Government have now qualified the provision with, “in a way relevant to the interests of national security”. That may well have been the original intention, but the Bill did not say that. That is why we raised the matter and I am pleased that the Government have seen fit to move on that.

I say gently to the Minister that if we are serious about border security, law is important, but we must have enough Border Force guards. I am worried that we do not have enough people to ensure that our borders are as safe and secure as the House wants. That resource point should not be missed as we legislate.

Mr Wallace: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will respond.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Torfaen and I have managed to find a way that accepts his points about ensuring that people have legitimate legal representation, but finds an alternative when the state has concerns that there could be abuse. There will be a code of practice and until it is approved by both Houses, law enforcement officials will not be able to use Schedule 3. There will be a public consultation and I am happy to discuss matters with him so that we can ensure that we clarify any further areas about which people may be concerned.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) made several points. One reason for discussing hostile state activity is what happened in Salisbury last year. There are hundreds of declared and undeclared foreign intelligence officers in the UK who seek to harm this country. They seek to undermine our values, corrupt our people and our news, carry out espionage and do us serious harm. None could be more serious than what happened in the Salisbury attack, where Novichok, a nerve agent banned by law, was used on our streets. That ended in a tragic death—the murder of a British citizen. That is outrageous and something that we did not really see even in the cold war. We should recognise that while the traditional barriers of the cold war and the 1980s are long gone, even more states are committing hostile acts every day, and we need the powers to deal with that.

4.15 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that as a society—not just as a Government and a House—we make it clear that the norms of international behaviour that we impose on ourselves are not universally accepted? The willingness to deploy both poisons such as Novichok and fake news, lies and so on might seem beyond reality to us, but is the norm for other regimes in the world. We have to be prepared to deal with such regimes and to push back against them.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes a strong observation about the rest of the world. Now is not the time for us to abandon our belief in the rule of law and, indeed, in the maintenance of our freedoms. In fact, we defeat others by leading by example. As he rightly points out, however, when we are faced by such adversaries, the challenge for any Government is to navigate their way through, to keep people safe while upholding their belief in the values and freedoms that we enjoy in the United Kingdom and maintaining the rule of law.

The stops—powers under Schedules 3 and 7—have been around in the terrorism space since 2000. They are strong powers, and they are limited by being used only at the border. Their use is not open to normal police officers going about their normal business. We do that to ensure that we maintain the freedoms in our society, while at our vulnerabilities, such as at borders, we have that extra layer in order to deal with—

Sir Mike Penning: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wallace: No, I will press on to the end. I do not think that my right hon. Friend has been in the debate.

It is important to deal with issues as we look at the legislation. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) used the B word, although I had hoped to get through the whole debate without using it. One of the delights of being the Security Minister is that in the world of intelligence sharing and of law and order, Brexit has often been kept at bay. However, the right hon. Gentleman has raised the issue, and we have taken steps to deal with it through private conversations with Ministers from around Europe and the European Commission and through the withdrawal agreement in the deal, which got us access to nearly all the things that we have now. That is why I was, and am, in favour of the deal—security is incredibly important.

We have recruited hundreds more people in order to strengthen the border and to deal with anticipated changes as we get there. The Government are taking that seriously, and we will plan to deal with it. However, it is at our borders that we will be most vulnerable, which is why this new power will help the police and intelligence services at least to keep our borders safer than they are now. That will not change, whatever our relationship with Europe. The hostile-state power will be for our domestic intelligence services and police, and whether we are in or out of Europe, half in or half out, or whatever we are, this power will be a welcome one that they are willing and wanting to use.
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Obviously, the B word is my favourite word at the moment. On information sharing, does the Minister agree that although we are leaving the EU, we are not leaving Europe? We will be a good neighbour as far as security and information sharing are concerned as we move forward into the future.

Mr Wallace: Within the remit of the Bill, we should remember that intelligence is the preserve of the nation state and will continue to be so. That has not changed and will not change. Contrary to what Sir Richard Dearlove, the head of MI6 at the time of the Iraq war, said in a letter that he put out last week, we managed to be full members of the Five Eyes and NATO at the same as we were full members of the European Union, so I do not believe that that will be lessened, whatever our status. We will still be members of the Five Eyes and NATO, whatever our relationship with the EU post 29 March. That is why the Bill is pitched correctly. It deals with the threats we have faced. The lessons we have learned from terrorist attack and from the hostile-state attack by Russia last year, and we are only as good as the lessons we learn. That is why the Bill is important in giving us the powers that we need.

In closing, I thank the Bill team, who have put up with their Minister wanting far too many changes, for helping me to deliver the sort of collaborative working that I used not to see, I am afraid, when I was in opposition a long time ago and for producing a Bill that I think most of the House regard as a good place to be. I am also grateful to their lordships for improving the Bill and to Her Majesty’s Opposition, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National party for their changes to the Bill. Thanks to those changes, we have a Bill that truly will help to bring people together and deliver better security.

I also thank the hon. Member for Torfaen for putting up with my struggling pronunciation of his constituency—I hope I got it right, but my Welsh is very poor—the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). I thank, too, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for his helpful suggestions and his campaign on the designated areas. He was part of their inspiration, so he can carry some of the blame if it turns out in a few years that they do not work. [Laughter.] I will take some of the blame; so can he.

Finally, I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who performed gallantly as my Parliamentary Private Secretary through Committee, and our usual channel, the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). I also thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers for steering the Bill through the House.

Lords amendment 12 agreed to.

Lords amendments 14, 15 and 17 to 42 agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).
Heald, Rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, Rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, Rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Rh Sir Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Keegan, Julian
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, Rh Andrea
Lee, Rh Stephen
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, Rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Rh Brandon
Lewis, Rh Dr Julian
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, Rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, Rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, Rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Rh Penny
Morgan, Rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, Rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newman, Sarah
Nokes, Rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
O’fford, 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, Rh Christopher
Pollitt, Rh 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
Roberts, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rothley, Lee
Rudd, Rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, Rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, Rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Royston
Soames, Rh Sir Nicholas
Speelman, Rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, Rh Gary
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swain, Rh Sir Desmond
Swire, Rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelayn, Anne-Marie
Truss, Rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, Rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, Rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, Rh Gavin
Wilson, Rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, Rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Iain Stewart and
Wendy Morton

NOES

Abbott, Rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonya
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, Rh Sir Kevin
Benn, Rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackford, Rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brake, Rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Rh Liam
Cable, Rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, Rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, Rh Yvette
Corbyn, Rh Jeremy
Cowen, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella

Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, Rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dockerty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Mara
Eford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furness, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

_Tellers for the Noes:_
Colleen Fletcher and Jeff Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith [Standing Order No. 118(6)],

**EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CUSTOMS) (ISLE OF MAN)**

That the draft Crown Dependencies Customs Union (Isle of Man) (EU Exit) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 26 November, be approved. —(Jeremy Quin.)

_The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 263._

**Division No. 300**

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<td>Churchhill, Jo</td>
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<td>Clark, Colin</td>
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| Tellers for the Noes: | Colleen Fletcher and Jeff Smith |

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth</td>
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<td>Courts, Robert</td>
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<td>Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey</td>
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<td>Crabb, rh Stephen</td>
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<td>Dinenage, Caroline</td>
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<td>Djanogly, Mr Jonathan</td>
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<td>Docherty, Leo</td>
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<td>Dodds, rh Nigel</td>
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<td>Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.</td>
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<td>Duguid, David</td>
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<td>Duncan, rh Sir Alan</td>
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<td>Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain</td>
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<td>Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias</td>
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<td>Evennett, rh Sir David</td>
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<td>Fallon, rh Sir Michael</td>
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<td>Field, rh Mark</td>
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<td>Foster, Kevin</td>
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<td>Francois, rh Mr Mark</td>
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<td>Fysh, rh Mr Marcus</td>
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</table>
Division No. 301

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
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
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Bradley, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James

**NOES**

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Ruth Smeeth, Minister for the Constitution and Civil Service, read out the Ayes.

**Question accordingly agreed to.**

**EXTINGUISHING THE EUROPEAN UNIFICATION (CUSTOMS) (JERSEY) ORDER 2018**

The draft Crown Dependencies Customs Union Order (Jersey) (EU Exit) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 15 November, be approved. — [Jeremy Quin.]
Question accordingly agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I remind the House that this vote is subject to double majority voting, first of the whole House, then of constituencies in England.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

E D U C A T I O N

That the draft Higher Education (Fee Limits For Accelerated Courses) (England) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 November 2018, be approved. —(Jeremy Quin.)

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 223.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England: Ayes 269, Noes 200.

D I V I S I O N N O . 3 0 2 ] 2 2 J A N U A R Y 2 0 1 9

A Y E S

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afram, 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
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
### NOES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbott, rh Ms Diane</th>
<th>Foxcroft, Vicky</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abrams, Debbie</td>
<td>Frith, James</td>
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<td>Glindon, Mary</td>
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<td>Harman, rh Ms Harriet</td>
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### Motion

Question accordingly agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

## EXTING THE EUROPEAN UNION (INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY)

That the draft Intellectual Property (Exhaustion of Rights) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 27 November 2018, be approved.—(Jeremy Quin.)

### The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 266.

#### Division No. 303

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### Tellers for the Ayes:

Thangam Debbonaire and Jeff Smith
Gauke, Mr David
Ghan, Mr Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, Mr Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, Mr Chris
Green, Chris
Green, Mr Damian
Greening, Mr Justine
Grieve, Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, Mr Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr Matt
Hands, Mr Greg
Harper, Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Michael
Heald, Mr Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, Mr Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, Mr Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, Mr George
Holliwarne, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, Mr Said
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Andrew
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Mr Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Mr Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Mr Greg
Knight, Jessica
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mr Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, Mr Andrea
Lee, Mr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, Mr Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Mr Brandon
Lewis, Mr Dr Julian
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Malt House, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, Mr Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Mr Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, Mr Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, Mr Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Mr Penny
Morgan, Mr Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, Mr David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Mr Caroline
Norman, Mr Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
O’Farrell, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, Mr Priti
Paterson, Mr Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Mr Sir Mike
Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
Perry, Mr Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Mr Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, Mr John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, Mr Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, Mr Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, Mr Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Mr Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Mr Royston
Soames, Mr Sir Nicholas
Spelman, Mr Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mr Mel
Stuart, Mr Graham
Surdy, Mr Julian
Surak, Mr Rishi
Swaney, Mr Sir Desmond
Swire, Sir Hugo
Symes, Mr Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurston, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, Mr David
Trevelyan, Mr Anne-Marie
Truss, Mr Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, Mr Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shai
Vickers, Martin
Viliers, Mr Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittingdale, Mr Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, Mr Gavin
Wilson, Mr Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mr Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, Mr Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Craig Whittaker and Mike Freer
Question accordingly 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 (Austria) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 3 December 2018, be approved.—(Jeremy Quin.)

Question agreed to.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During the urgent question on proxy voting and baby leave, I saw you standing behind the Speaker’s Chair, taking a keen interest in the announcement that the House was moving forward in the matter. Was that out of personal interest, or the wider interests of the House and its Members?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That is the most interesting point of order I have ever been asked in my life, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for asking it. First of all, he is absolutely right in having noticed my presence in the Chamber—of course I cannot sit on the Benches when Mr Speaker is in the Chair, but a very important matter was being discussed.

I should make it absolutely clear that my personal interest in proxy voting or baby leave is historical. That is probably rather obvious, but it as well to make the point. I am one of those who dealt with giving birth to my son when there was no such helpful support from the House, the House authorities or anyone else for that matter. I therefore have every sympathy with those who are going through such matters at present. My son was born one week after the 2001 general election, and that was not easy to navigate, because there is no such thing as maternity leave on election day.

The hon. Gentleman was right in the latter part of his point—my interest now is general. It is very important that we make this House work as a reflection of the society that we represent throughout the whole country. That means understanding that producing the next generation is an important and necessary duty, which has to be done by women at the same time as they are doing other things. I am very grateful to him for having noticed my presence, because I thought I was invisible. I should say, while I am waxing lyrical, which I should not be from the Chair, that the hon. Gentleman and his Committee have done a wonderful piece of work on this important matter.

I apologise for the delay. We now come to the petition.

PETITION

Green Deal Scheme

5.39 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Apology accepted, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was pleased to hear your comments on that very important issue.

Nearly 300 households in my constituency have been affected by the utterly shameful mis-selling by Robert Skillen’s company, Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems—or HELMS, as it is better known—all carried out under the umbrella of the UK Government’s green deal scheme. Far too many people were tricked into signing away their solar energy feed-in tariffs to HELMS’s sister company, PV Solar. In fact, many have not signed them over yet, but PV Solar still collects the tariffs. There is a host of other issues, which I do not have time to go into this evening, but they were outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) when he presented his ten-minute rule Bill earlier today. Suffice it to say that the Government’s response thus far has been utterly woeful and must improve.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Paisley and Renfrewshire North, Declares that the Government-backed Green Deal Scheme has adversely affected residents of Paisley and Renfrewshire North both financially and psychologically; further that many residents have, in good faith, invested their life saving or accrued several thousands of pounds of debt to pay for work that was carried out by companies approved by the Green Deal Scheme; further that in some cases the work including the installation of insulation and of solar panels, was incomplete; further that some were sub-standard and in many cases residents were given incorrect information which led them to believe that they would save or make money when in fact they have simply lost money; and further that in other cases the installer did not apply for building warrants and as a result they are unable to sell their properties, or have the peace of mind that their homes are safe to live in, or that the insurance policies residents continue to pay are valid without a building warrant.

The petitions therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compensate financially and protect people who have found themselves suffering in this way after signing up to this Government-backed scheme using Government-approved installers.

And the petitions remain, etc.
Pupil Referral Units

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

5.42 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Pupil referral units perform excellent work in my constituency and across the country in complementing mainstream schools. There are two in my constituency, Youth Challenge and Lever Park, and both are run by Bolton Impact Trust. When I met the trust recently, I was made aware of how vital these units are to the pupils who rely on them and how fantastic they are at delivering the service and support they do to those pupils. Both were rated outstanding in their last Ofsted inspections.

It was a particular delight when I visited to hear of the relationship that Youth Challenge had with local business. It is an important fact about these units that often the experience of children is in vocational work and training and that often those are the kinds of careers they go into once they have finished school, whether that is at age 16 or 18. That transition into mainstream employment is very important. The close relationship that the unit has with local business is very good for local businesses, which increasingly understand the value that these children can contribute to their businesses, and also sets a positive direction of travel and gives the children the opportunity and vision to move into good and productive jobs once they leave education.

The services provided by Bolton Impact Trust really do make a difference. That can come in the form of 1:1 teaching support, which a teacher in a mainstream school, perhaps with a class of 30 or so pupils, cannot provide, but it does others things as well. There is one simple, straightforward thing that it does. Teachers often sit with children at lunchtime, and that engagement between adults and children can produce a useful environment that is more relaxed than a formal classroom setting. It also reinforces the support that referral units give to families. Mums and dads often have a very challenging time. Bringing up any children obviously has its challenges, but the support that these units can give by introducing more stable adult figures to children’s lives is very important.

There is concern about funding, as was confirmed by my visit to Bolton Impact Trust. As the Minister will know, the dedicated schools grant is split into four notional blocks, but I want to focus on the high needs block.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has raised a vital issue. Given the importance of helping children who are ill, pupil referral units are an essential tool to retaining access to education that is specifically tailored to them. Should that not be protected at all costs?

Chris Green: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Different schools and different parts of the educational structure serve different groups of children. The work done by referral units and, more widely, by specialist schools is very important, and ought to be protected. There will always be a need for these units, and they ought to be reassured that support will continue. Many of the people who work for them are very specialised and highly trained, and we must maintain that continuity in order to maintain that talent.

High needs funding is essential in helping to meet the educational requirements of pupils. The cost of those additional needs can be as much as £10,000 a year, £6,000 more than the normal average of £4,000. As the Minister is no doubt aware, local authorities determine the budgets for referral units and specialist schools on the basis of the number of places that are required before commissioning those places at £10,000 per place per annum, regardless of whether they are taken up.

In that context, it is important to recognise the difference between specialist schools, where there is a certain continuity, and referral units, where the intake can be slightly more erratic. If a place is taken up, the local authority funds a top-up on a daily and weekly basis. That funding model works very well for specialist schools. They normally experience less in-year movement of pupils, which means that forecasting income is comparatively straightforward. The situation in referral units is much more volatile. For example, in September there were 170 pupils on the roll in Bolton, but by the following June the number had risen to 260. There can be a stark contrast between the numbers at one point and the numbers at a later stage.

We need a responsive system. Because specialist schools have a longer-term relationship with children, there tends to be far more clarity about who will be in those schools, and hence more clarity about access to funding. Moreover, the main aim of referral units is to support pupils so successfully that they are able to return to mainstream schools, and an unfortunate consequence of that success is that a unit will lose between £12,000 and £14,000 per pupil per year. The current funding model provides no incentive for a referral unit to deliver successful outcomes. They will of course be focused on delivering successful outcomes, but there is a clear challenge in the funding model. Certain costs, such as for the building and the staff, are permanent regardless of the number of people in the unit, but the income can significantly vary over a period of time. Would it not make more sense to have a funding model that did not disadvantage referral units for successful outcomes, rather than one that could be seen as an incentive to units keeping hold of children? PRUs that are doing very good work, perhaps better than average, must not lose the money that is coming to them more quickly than the average, because that would be a disincentive.

In addition, there is no consistency in how local authorities determine the level of top-up funding for PRUs, and more broadly for specialist schools, when additional funding is required to support challenging behaviours. Often PRUs are unable to determine the level of a pupil’s needs until they have worked with them for a few weeks. At that point, with the pupil’s needs being met, it can be a challenge for the PRU to obtain additional funding from the local authority because the placement has already been made, and naturally, local authorities who are under a great deal of financial pressure, having decided to give a certain amount of funding, would find it challenging to give more funding; there would be resistance to that.

Does the Minister agree that a system which provided greater consistency and security of funding, whereby services are commissioned in a manner which allowed
schools and academies to predict their income accurately, would deliver a better service for pupils? That would also lead to a reduction in the degree of friction between local authorities and providers, and allow greater emphasis to be put on educational standards, rather than needing to focus on volatile funding. Often in units much of the management time is spent on asking, “How do we get the money in? How do we get the funding in? How many meetings do we have? How much pressure do we have to apply?” That time ought to be focused more on the needs of the unit itself.

PRUs provide a vital service both locally and nationally, but we must focus on how we can reward units for success. The units in my constituency have been remarkably successful and are deserving of their outstanding status. How can we remove the financial penalty I have described? What steps can the Minister take to address the concerns of referral units and deliver more consistent funding in such an important part of children’s education?

5.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on securing this important debate. He speaks from experience of his local PRU and the work it does with the local community, businesses and of course families to deliver good outcomes. I am aware that Bolton Impact Trust has been in discussion with the Department about the funding issues and I will write to my hon. Friend on that.

Alternative provision can offer a lifeline to some children and their parents, such as through smaller classes and more tailored support from teachers, helping them flourish, and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for raising the issue of children who may be very unwell. It is vital that young people in alternative provision, including those in pupil referral units, receive a high-quality education and are able to fulfil their potential. We need to be just as ambitious for pupils in alternative provision as we are for those in mainstream schools.

We have deliberately maintained a flexible approach to the funding of alternative provision, as we understand that local authorities discharge their responsibilities for those who are not in school in different ways. We expect local authorities to explore the most effective arrangements for alternative provision commissioning and funding in their area. They should always take account of the needs of local schools in determining the demand for alternative provision and how it is delivered, and encourage schools to think collectively about their use of AP, including the consequences of the decisions on excluded pupils.

Many local areas have developed strong partnership arrangements that seek to share responsibilities across schools for AP commissioning and funding. Local authorities and schools should be aware of the cost of maintaining good-quality AP in different settings and be able to make placement decisions on the basis of the cost and quality of what is on offer. There should be informed discussions in the local schools forum about how AP is funded. Funding for pupil referral units is normally provided as place funding and top-up funding. Funding of £10,000 per place is supplemented by top-up funding from the commissioner of the place.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Could the Minister outline what funding is provided for pupil referral units and alternative provision in order to provide the important inreach work being done in mainstream schools to support kids so that they do not end up in a pupil referral unit in the future?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. I hope that my remarks will continue to deal with the issue of funding and how much investment we are making.

As I was saying, the funding of £10,000 per place is supplemented by top-up funding from the commissioner of the place. Both the number of places to be funded and the amount of top-up funding are matters that are decided locally. Top-up funding is the funding that is required in excess of the £10,000 place funding to reflect the full cost of the provision needed, depending on how long the pupil is expected to be in the unit and on other local factors. It can also reflect costs that enable those units to remain financially viable, which goes to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West’s point. It is important that places are available when they are needed.

In our operational guidance, we have advised that commissioning local authorities and schools should carefully consider the top-up funding arrangements to ensure that there are no perverse incentives and that the funding achieves the intended outcomes. It is possible to develop a top-up funding system that more closely reflects the achievement of the desired outcomes, as a way of encouraging high-quality AP. For example, an element of the payment could be withheld from the pupil referral unit until the pupil returns to his or her mainstream school or achieves another outcome.

Funding for AP comes primarily from the high-needs block of the dedicated schools grant. Based on local authorities’ reports of their spending, the Department estimates that around 10% of the high-needs budget is spent on AP. The proportion of spend on AP from the high-needs budget has remained roughly stable in the past few years. Last year, local authorities reported approximately £632 million of expenditure on AP, including on pupil referral units. However, schools are also able to commission AP places and services directly, and when a school does this, it is funded from its delegated share of the school block, which the local authority distributes to it through its local formula. Last year, the core schools and high-needs budget was almost £41 billion. This is set to rise to £43.5 billion next year. While more money is going into our schools, including into the high-needs block, we recognise the budgeting challenges that schools face and that we are asking them to do more.

Acknowledging that and the cost pressures on local authorities, and because children only get one chance at a great education, the Government have prioritised and protected schools and high-needs spending even while having to make difficult public spending decisions in other areas. Last month, we announced £250 million of additional funding for high needs over this financial year and the next, bringing the total high-needs allocation to £6.1 billion this year and £6.3 billion in 2019-20. We have listened to the particular concerns expressed by many local authorities and others, including Members of this House, about high-needs budget pressures, and additional investment will help local authorities to manage those pressures.
[Nadhim Zahawi]

However, while funding is important, which is why we have protected the core schools budget in real terms per pupil from last year to next, funding is just one part of the story, because what happens to the money and the quality of AP are both important. That is why my Department is committed to reforming alternative provision and set out its plans for doing so in a reform road map last March. The plan for reform set out the aspirations of strengthening partnership arrangements for commissioning and delivering AP and the steps we are taking.

We are providing a stable evidence base for the reforms. The Department contacted Isos Partnership to undertake research into local AP markets. The research, published late last year, looked at the range and efficacy of different AP commissioning and funding models. It sought to engage local authorities, schools and AP across the country and shows that some areas are developing effective commissioning and funding arrangements between local authorities, schools and alternative providers to ensure that suitable provision is made for children with additional needs.

In Bath and North East Somerset, for example, funding from the high-needs block is devolved by the local authority to six behaviour and attendance panels across the area. These panels of primary and secondary heads are responsible for co-ordinating in-year admissions, supporting children at risk of exclusion, and managing referrals into alternative provision. The vast majority of schools in Nottinghamshire belong to schools partnerships, from the high-needs block is devolved by the local authority to six behaviour and attendance panels across the area. These panels of primary and secondary heads are responsible for co-ordinating in-year admissions, supporting children at risk of exclusion, and managing referrals into alternative provision. The vast majority of schools in Nottinghamshire belong to schools partnerships, which receive high-needs funding from the local authority for both alternative provision and SEN support. When a school in Nottinghamshire excludes a pupil, the cost of their placement in alternative provision is recovered from the school or partnership in question. That system has resulted in an inclusive school system, with a low incidence of permanent exclusion—less than half the national average.

To build on what we have learnt of such arrangements, the Department announced its intention last month to launch a call for evidence to understand better the financial incentives that can affect decisions within the wider high needs funding system, including decisions relating to alternative provision, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West rightly highlighted. We are also investing £4 million into an innovation fund for AP. This externally-evaluated fund is supporting nine innovative projects, from across the country, to understand more about how to improve outcomes for children in AP. The initiatives focus on supporting children in AP to make good academic progress and successful post-16 transitions, reintegration into suitable mainstream or special school placements, and increasing parental or carer engagement.

We are committed to protecting all children from exploitation and abuse, whether from county lines, gang activity, or sexual abuse, which is why this Government have invested £3.6 million in a new national county lines co-ordination centre as one of the key commitments in the serious violence strategy. The Department is also providing up to £2 million for a new national response unit to help local authorities to support vulnerable children at risk of exploitation by criminal threats. Good discipline in schools is essential to ensure that all pupils can benefit from the opportunities provided by education. The Government absolutely support headteachers in using exclusion as a sanction, where warranted. It is equally important that the obligations on schools are clear and well understood to ensure that any exclusion is lawful, reasonable and fair.

A review of exclusions, led by Edward Timpson, is under way. The review is considering how schools use exclusion and how it affects all pupils, but it is particularly considering why some groups of children are more likely to be excluded. The review will report its findings early this year, with the Department’s response to follow.

Vicky Foxcroft: The Minister said that he would return to the point about the inreach work that PRUs do with mainstream education and about how much funding is allocated towards that work. I have listened with great interest, and I do not believe I have heard that question answered.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the point about the inreach work that PRUs do with mainstream education and about how much funding is allocated towards that work. I have listened with great interest, and I do not believe I have heard that question answered.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I put the Question, I must inform the House that there was an error in calculating the number of votes of Members for English constituencies in the Division on motion 7 on the Higher Education (Fee Limits for Accelerated Courses) (England) Regulations 2018. The figures for the England-only vote should not have been announced as: Ayes, 269; Noes, 200. They should have been announced as: Ayes, 269; Noes, 194. The figures for the vote of the whole House are as previously announced, and the result is unaffected.

I appreciate the attention of the House. It is not an exciting announcement, but it is essential to set the record straight.

Question put and agreed to.

6.8 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 23 January 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

EU Withdrawal Agreement

1. Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the EU withdrawal agreement on Wales. [908670]

2. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the Welsh economy of the EU withdrawal agreement. [908679]

3. Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on Wales of the EU withdrawal agreement. [908683]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): With your permission, Mr Speaker, before I answer the questions, may I say that I am sure the House will want to join me in paying tribute and respect to Assembly Member Steffan Lewis, who sadly died just over a week ago? He was a bright and dedicated politician who had an exceptional future in front of him, with so much to offer Wales. My prayers and thoughts are with his wife, Shona, and son, Celyn, at this most difficult time.

I can update the House that the UK air accidents investigation branch is working with the relevant rescue and transportation authorities in relation to Emiliano Sala and the pilot who went missing on Monday evening. I am sure that the whole House wishes to join me in hoping for a positive outcome.

The Government are working to identify the broadest possible consensus on a way forward so that we leave the European Union in a smooth and orderly manner. We are engaging with Members on both sides of the House and with representatives of business groups, civil society, trade unions and others.

Angela Crawley: A recent report by The UK in a Changing Europe has found that almost half of all respondents oppose the Prime Minister’s deal, with only 23% in support. How can the Secretary of State reconcile his position of being Wales’s champion in Westminster when this place is working contrary to Welsh public opinion?

Alun Cairns: In the first instance, I remind the hon. Lady that Wales voted to leave the European Union in even stronger numbers than the rest of the United Kingdom. The withdrawal agreement sets out the basis on which, and how, we will leave the European Union. In the light of last week’s votes, we are determined to make amendments and to develop a document in consultation with colleagues across the House in order to win the House of Commons’ support.

Chris Elmore: May I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s comments about Steffan Lewis? He and I worked together as young researchers in the National Assembly for Wales. We must remember the words of our colleague Jo Cox that we do have a lot more in common across this House and across the devolved institutions.

Will the Secretary of State simply rule out now, and make representations to the Prime Minister to rule out, no deal, so that the automotive industry in Bridgend—Ford in Bridgend employs many of my constituents—can have certainty beyond March? This continuing planning for no deal is providing no certainty to anybody.

Hywel Williams: In an excellent briefing on the 9th, organised by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on the effects of leaving the European Union on businesses in Northern Ireland, I was told the slightly unknown fact that 40% of Northern Ireland perishable food exports come through Holyhead. This fact was not known to the people I met then, and is perhaps not known to other Members of this House. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact of a no deal on the supply chains that sustain the exports of such foods through the port of Holyhead, and will he confirm what steps he is taking personally to mitigate that impact?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the port of Holyhead. It is the second busiest port in the UK during the summer months, but of course all year round it is pretty critical to the supply chain, particularly for foodstuffs that come from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. A ports working group has been in place for quite some time—it involves the UK Government, the Welsh Government and the relevant UK Government agencies—to plan for a deal, and also to plan for no deal, as a responsible Government would do.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that voters in Wales will not forgive this place if we fail to respect the outcome of the 2016 referendum, and that businesses in Wales will not forgive us if we create a set of circumstances that makes their job of creating jobs in Wales even harder? Given those two imperatives, does my right hon. Friend agree that actually passing a withdrawal agreement—passing a deal—is absolutely essential now?
**Alun Cairns:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. He obviously recognises the importance of gaining a deal, and I have no doubt he will play a significant part in working with the Government and influencing colleagues in understanding the opportunities and the challenges that we face. He is absolutely right: the ports in Pembrokeshire are extremely important to the Welsh economy—my right hon. Friend regularly highlights those—but he also understands the importance of agriculture and manufacturing, and why a deal is so important to those sectors, too.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the opportunities for Wales, once we leave the European Union, of more jobs and investment, and also of the potential for Wales to boom, as opposed to the doom and gloom of the Labour party?

**Alun Cairns:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that question. He will be well aware that, in the past quarter, the UK economy was growing faster than the eurozone economy—the UK grew by 0.6% while the German and Italian economies went into decline. That highlights some of the opportunities that we face, but, of course, we can grasp them in the smoothest way only if we manage to get a deal with the European Union.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): Given that the Wales CBI has said that a no-deal Brexit will see a £7 billion annual fall in Welsh manufacturing output and output generally in the economy, will he, for goodness’ sake, simply admit that a no-deal Brexit will be bad for Wales? Before he responds, let me say that I do not want a Maybotic answer.

**Alun Cairns:** The hon. Gentleman will know that there are many predictions in economic forecasts, but they are forecasts rather than fact. He will have predicted a recession after the 2010 general election—he may well have even predicted a double or triple-dip recession—but I hope that he will recognise the fantastic employment data that was published yesterday showing record numbers of people in work in Wales. The inactivity rates in Wales are at staggeringly positive numbers, matching the rest of the UK for the first time since records began.

**Christina Rees** (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the words of the Secretary of State with regard to Steffan Lewis and Emiliano Sala.

The Secretary of State voted for the Prime Minister’s disastrously flawed withdrawal agreement—he was one of the few, not the many. Will he explain why the Government pretend that nothing has changed, despite their suffering the biggest defeat in parliamentary history?

**Alun Cairns:** It is no secret that the House did not support the deal that was presented to it last week, but we are committed to working with colleagues across our own Benches, and across the House, to come forward with a proposal that can gather the support of the House of Commons and, obviously, to negotiate with the European Union in order to get a deal. I am sure that the hon. Lady would much prefer to see a deal and I challenge her to say whether she was comfortable being in the same Lobby as some colleagues, from all parts of the House, who would like to see no deal.

**Christina Rees:** I think that that was a Cairnsbotic answer.

Yesterday, the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, cleared Government business in the Welsh Assembly so that he and his Cabinet Ministers could make urgent statements on how a no-deal outcome would be so disastrous for the people of Wales. Will the Secretary of State tell us if he will be voting for amendments put forward in this House to avoid a no-deal outcome, or will he, like his Prime Minister, put party before country?

**Alun Cairns:** I can advise the House that the UK Government have laid 75 statutory instruments at the Assembly’s request. We have had countless meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee and the Prime Minister has agreed to invite the First Minister to the European Union Exit and Trade (Preparedness) Sub-Committee. I hope that that demonstrates the joint work that is taking place. The hon. Lady talks about putting party interests first. I cannot understand why the First Minister of Wales is happy to meet the Prime Minister—they will be meeting later today—but the Leader of the Opposition refuses to meet her to discuss the prospect of a deal, yet seems always happy to meet the IRA.

**UK Shared Prosperity Fund**

2. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the design of the UK shared prosperity fund.

6. **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effect of the UK shared prosperity fund on Wales.

**The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):** I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues and Welsh Government Ministers on a range of issues affecting Wales, including on the UK shared prosperity fund.

**Jessica Morden:** EU structural funds have been crucial for communities across Wales, and it is vital that Wales must not be left behind—we need that assurance. Why has it taken so long to get any detail from the Government on the shared prosperity fund, not least the consultation, which was promised by the Government before Christmas?

**Alun Cairns:** I agree that the UK shared prosperity fund will be extremely important to all parts of the UK. My specific interest is protecting Welsh interests in the development of that policy. On 14 January, I spoke to the Welsh Government’s Brexit Minister, Jeremy Miles, to update him on the latest stages of the plans for consultation, and I also committed to sharing that with him before we formally consult. Of course we want to engage with a whole load of stakeholders. There is widespread recognition that the current structure does not work, and we have an opportunity to get it right.

**Ben Lake:** Between 2014 and 2020, Wales will have received £2.4 billion in structural funding, or over 20% of the total UK allocation of EU funds. Will the UK Government ensure that Wales continues to receive at least an equivalent share of funding from the shared prosperity fund?
Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Given the not unreasonable concern in north Wales about Hitachi’s decision to suspend development of Wylfa B, is my right hon. Friend willing to meet representatives of the North Wales Economic Ambition Board to discuss ways in which the shared prosperity fund may be used to support the regional economy?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, in which he highlights some of the most recent data. The complete data on the period since European structural funding was introduced show that more than £4 billion has been spent over 17 years, but I am sure he agrees that we have not always got the best value out of that investment—there are several audit reports to that effect. Of course, any quantum of the UK shared prosperity fund is a matter reserved for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor during the comprehensive spending review.

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Kevin Foster: I am delighted to hear that positive assessment from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made about Steffan Lewis? As his local MP, I always admired and respected him, and his passion for Wales will be greatly missed within the Assembly. It is a loss to Welsh political life.

The closing of the tolls at the M4 bridge creates massive opportunities. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with other Government Departments to bring regional offices and Government jobs to Wales?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his work in this area to encourage closer working between this super-region that is being developed. The great western powerhouse allows the south-west of England and south Wales to market themselves jointly to start competing with the northern powerhouse and the Midlands engine. I know that he has strong interest in the M4, and together we will attract more investment.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): May I begin by associating myself with the comments that the Secretary of State made about Steffan Lewis? As his local MP, I always admired and respected him, and his passion for Wales will be greatly missed within the Assembly. It is a loss to Welsh political life.

The closing of the tolls at the M4 bridge creates massive opportunities. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with other Government Departments to bring regional offices and Government jobs to Wales?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for such a question. A number of discussions are going on across Government Departments about the drive to decentralise civil service opportunities from London. He will be aware of the Cardiff hub, and we are looking to where other opportunities exist. But abolishing the Severn tolls has also created challenges. We need better integration for projects such as the Chepstow bypass and other road projects that work cross-border, and we need to harness those as priorities.

Economy

7. Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): What recent assessment has he made of the strength of the Welsh economy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Nigel Adams): The Welsh economy has shown significant progress in recent years. The rate of employment in Wales is at a record high and increased by more than that in any other part of the UK over the last year, with 64,000 more people in work. There is a wealth of world-leading innovation in Wales, with Welsh businesses spending over £450 million on research and development in 2017.

Mark Tami: The decision on Wylfa Newydd is a massive setback, not only for Anglesey but for the whole north Wales economy, and the project was a central plank of the north Wales growth deal. When it comes to major infrastructure projects, the Secretary of State has a record of unmitigated failure; he has a kind of reverse Midas touch. When will he start to speak up for Wales in Cabinet? If he is not prepared to speak up for Wales, will he step aside and let someone else have a go?

Nigel Adams: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that there is no greater champion for Wales than my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. However, the hon. Gentleman raises a very serious and important point regarding Wylfa. This does affect the whole region. The Government were willing to offer a significant and generous package of potential support, but despite that, Hitachi decided that the project was still too great a commercial challenge. We are still committed to nuclear sites as part of the UK’s future energy mix, and we will also continue to support the Isle of Anglesey with initiatives such as the north Wales growth deal.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I understand from my colleague Rhun ap Iorwerth AM that, given the economic uncertainty now surrounding Hitachi’s future at Wylfa Newydd, the Welsh Government have indicated that they are prepared to commit further funds to the north Wales growth bid if Westminster makes the same commitment. Will it?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady makes an important point. We are certainly open-minded. Commitments such as this must be project-led. I reiterate that we recognise the significant impact that Hitachi’s decision will have on the region and planned investment, some of which could be co-dependent on the growth deal. We are committing £120 million, as the hon. Lady knows, and we will certainly talk to our partners in Wales. In fact, I am going there next week to talk with Ministers and stakeholders.

Liz Saville Roberts: I greatly appreciate that the Minister sees the importance of the north Wales growth bid, particularly in relation to the news at Wylfa. It is interesting that the British Government offered Hitachi a one-third equity stake in the £20 billion nuclear power development in Ynys Môn. Now that Wylfa Newydd looks set to be the latest project to join the Welsh infrastructure scrapyard, will the Minister guarantee that his Government will use the previously promised equity to create 850 alternative, permanent and well-paid jobs in north-west Wales?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We are certainly not abandoning that area of Wales. I reiterate that this was a commercial decision. We are committing £120 million to the north Wales growth deal, which we hope to get over the line as soon as practically possibly. The Government’s decision to agree to take an equity stake, to secure a strike price and to underwrite the debt on that project, was incredibly generous.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Since 2013, we have seen the cancellation of the Atlantic Array wind turbines off south Wales, the cancellation of the Celtic Array wind farms off north Wales, the cancellation of the Cardiff-Swansea rail line in 2018, the cancellation of the Swansea bay tidal lagoon in 2018 and—to cap it all, the cancellation of cancellations—the cancellation of Wylfa Newydd last week, which was a £16 billion investment that would have transformed the economy of north Wales. Will the Secretary of State support the establishment of an inquiry, which the CBI in Wales has
Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman seems to miss the fact that these are commercial decisions to put these projects on hold. In terms of Hitachi, it is a suspended project. We will continue to engage with Hitachi regarding options for the site. We are absolutely committed to creating a broad-based, resilient economy through our industrial strategy, and we will continue to work with the private sector, local partners and the Welsh Government to ensure that Wales prospers. I hope that Members across the House welcome the news this week that the employment rate in Wales now matches that of the UK for the first time since my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) was the Secretary of State for Wales.

Fuel Duty Freeze: Low-income Families

8. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the freeze on fuel duty on low-income families in Wales. [908678]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Nigel Adams): The Government recognise that transport is a major cost for households and businesses, so it was announced at last year’s Budget that fuel duty across the UK will remain frozen for the ninth successive year.

Robert Halfon: Despite the excellent fuel duty freeze from the Government, oil companies are still hitting motorists across Wales and the UK by increasing petrol prices hugely when the international oil price goes up but taking a long time to reduce it when the oil price goes down. Will my hon. Friend work with the Secretary of State for Transport and the Treasury to introduce a “pump watch” regulator, as recommended by FairFuelUK, so that there are fair prices for motorists at the pumps?

Nigel Adams: There is no greater champion for consumers than my right hon. Friend. But we do not believe that setting up a regulator would be justified, given the costs of doing so. This sector, like every other, is subject to the normal competition and consumer protection law. We are committed to passing on savings to commuters and, due to nine years of fuel duty freezes, the average car driver in Wales and the UK will have saved a cumulative £1,000 by April 2020.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that 30,000 low-income families in Wales will lose £2,500 a year as a result of the imposition of the two-child policy? Does he think that that is fair?

Nigel Adams: The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has announced that she will not extend the two-child limit on universal credit to children born before April 2017, when the policy first came into effect. That will benefit about 15,000 families, and the decision restores the original intent of the policy, which will give parents in receipt of universal credit the same choices as those in work.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

10. Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on (a) the economy and (b) public services in Wales of the UK leaving the EU without a deal. [908680]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): As we leave the European Union, our economy is growing faster than the eurozone, employment is at record high levels, and economic activity in Wales is at the highest level since records began.

Anna McMorrin: May I associate myself with the Minister’s comments on Steffan Lewis, who was one of the most able and talented politicians that Wales has ever had?

With days to go until we crash out with no deal, we know the devastating impact. The CBI is warning us, the Army is on stand-by to slaughter lambs set for export, and the Government are refusing to rule out no deal. What does the Minister say about that, given that the Prime Minister is not going to get her deal through?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has set out our position and is determined to work not only on our side of the House but across the House to introduce proposals that will allow the House of Commons to support a deal. It is interesting that the Welsh First Minister, Mark Drakeford, is prepared to meet her to discuss the proposals, but the Leader of the Opposition refuses to do so, in spite of being more than happy to meet the IRA on other occasions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am calling the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) in spite of time constraints. I know that she will ask a commendably brief question.

Baby Deaths and Stillbirths: Cwm Taf University Health Board

12. Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): If he will hold discussions with Ministers in the Welsh Government on investigations into the deaths and stillbirths of babies under Cwm Taf University health board. [908682]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Nigel Adams): I thank the right hon. Lady for raising this very important issue, and my thoughts are with all those families affected. I recognise her continued and passionate dedication to this issue and to ensuring that we have a health service that is fit for everyone. It is imperative that both the internal and external reviews of maternity services in Cwm Taf are both comprehensive and timely. Those affected will rightly be looking for urgent answers and clear action to ensure improvements in patient care and safety.

Ann Clwyd: I am grateful for that answer. Will the Secretary of State continue to monitor the investigation and report the findings back to the House?

Nigel Adams: Of course. At present, this is a matter for the Welsh Government and for the health board, but we await the findings of the review, and we will act
accordingly. In the meantime, the Government will continue to ensure that the NHS has the funding that it requires. I can assure the right hon. Lady that we will work with her to ensure that we get the right outcomes.

**PRIME MINISTER**

The Prime Minister was asked—

**Engagements**

Q1. [908729]Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 23 January.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that Members across the House will wish to join me in marking Holocaust Memorial Day this Sunday. It is an opportunity for us to remember all those who suffered in the holocaust and in subsequent genocides around the world. It is a reminder that we must all challenge and condemn prejudice and hatred wherever it is found.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Stephen Kerr: May I dissociate myself with the comments that the Prime Minister made in relation to Holocaust Memorial Day? May I also say as a proud Scot that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is the most successful political union that the world has ever known? That said, does the Prime Minister agree that, when Nicola Sturgeon demands a second independence referendum, only four years after we had the last one, the UK Government should side with the majority of the people of Scotland and firmly tell her no?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As he points out, Scotland held a referendum in 2014. It was legal, fair and decisive, and the people clearly voted for Scotland to remain part of the United Kingdom. More than that, at the last general election, the people of Scotland again sent a very clear message that they do not want a second divisive referendum, but the SNP sadly is out of touch with the people of Scotland and has not yet heard that message. The last thing we want is a second independence referendum. The United Kingdom should be pulling together, and should not be being driven apart.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Sunday is Holocaust Memorial Day, a time for us all to reflect on the horrors of genocide and to recommit to never again allowing the poison of antisemitism and racism to disfigure our society in any way. The Prime Minister was also right to acknowledge the other genocides that have happened since the second world war. It is up to us to try to prevent such horrors from ever happening again anywhere in the world.

After the overwhelming defeat of the Prime Minister’s deal, she says she wants solutions to the Brexit crisis that command sufficient support in the House. The Chancellor and the Business Secretary agree that there is a “large majority” in the Commons opposed to no deal, so will the Prime Minister listen to her own Cabinet members and take no deal off the table?

The Prime Minister: What I, members of the Cabinet and the whole Government are doing is working to ensure that we leave the European Union with a deal. That is the way to avoid no deal: to leave the European Union with a deal. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that what I have wanted to do—I have been doing it with Members across the House—is sit down and talk about how we can secure support in this House for a deal. He has been willing to sit down with Hamas, Hezbollah and the IRA without preconditions, yet he will not meet me to talk about Brexit. In this case, he is neither present nor involved.

Jeremy Corbyn: Actually I reached out to the Prime Minister last September when I offered to discuss our deals with her. It appears that, while the door to her office may well be open, the minds inside it are completely closed. She has shown no flexibility whatsoever on taking no deal off the table.

The Chancellor reassured businesses that amendments would be put down that “would have the effect of removing the threat of no deal...which is binding and effective”. Given that those amendments are now tabled, will the Prime Minister confirm that, if passed, they would rule out no deal?

The Prime Minister: We have seen amendments that seek to engineer a situation in which article 50 is extended. That does not solve the issue that there will always be a point of decision. The decision remains the same: no deal, a deal or no Brexit. I am delivering on Brexit. I want to do it with a deal. Why will the right hon. Gentleman not come and meet me and talk about it?

Jeremy Corbyn: The only consistency in the Prime Minister’s strategy seems to be running down the clock by threatening no deal as an alternative to her dead deal.

The CBI says that the “projected impact” of no deal on the UK economy “would be devastating”. Leaving with no deal would be a hammer blow to manufacturing in this country, costing jobs and damaging living standards.

Last week, the Justice Secretary was asked whether he ruled out a customs union. He said: “I don’t think we can”. However, that same day, the Leader of the House said that we cannot be in a customs union. Can the Prime Minister be clear? Do her Government rule out a customs union with the European Union?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about a customs union and I note that he has tabled an amendment. The Labour party used to refer to a comprehensive customs union, then it was a new customs union and now it is a permanent customs union, but the question—[Interruption. J] I am happy to sit down to talk to him about what he means by that. Does he mean accepting the common external tariff? Does he mean accepting the common commercial policy? Does he mean accepting the Union customs code? Does he mean accepting EU state aid rules? If he will not talk about it, there is only one conclusion: he hasn’t got a clue.

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Jeremy Corbyn: My question was: does the Prime Minister rule in or rule out a customs union? It is not complicated. She could have said yes, she could have said no. It is a key part of what Labour is putting forward and it is backed by the TUC, representing millions of workers; by the CBI, representing thousands of businesses; by the First Ministers of Wales and Scotland; and indeed by many members of her own party, including apparently her own chief of staff. So can the Prime Minister explain why she is ruling out a customs union as a solution to the crisis? She could for once actually answer the question.

The Prime Minister: Perhaps I can try to help the right hon. Gentleman here. When many people talk about a customs union, what they want to ensure is that businesses can export to the EU without facing tariffs, quotas or rules-of-origin checks. I agree, and the deal we negotiated delivers just that, but it also allows us to have an independent trade policy and to do our own trade deals with the rest of the world—the benefits of a customs union and the benefits of our own trade policy.

Jeremy Corbyn: The International Trade Secretary promised 40 trade agreements the second after Brexit. This morning, he could not name a single one. His own Business Minister said that he was not impressed by “sham trade agreements” and “not prepared to sell business down the river for other people’s political dogma.”

So why is the Prime Minister prepared to sell people’s jobs and living standards down the river, rather than negotiating a customs union that would be part of a sensible deal for the future?

The Prime Minister: The deal that we negotiated did protect jobs—[Interruption.] And it was rejected by this House. There are some specific issues that Members across this House have raised in relation to that deal and we work on those. We have already responded on a number of issues—parliamentary involvement, workers’ rights, citizens’ rights—as a result of the conversations that we have had with Members of this House. What we want to ensure is that we get a deal that protects jobs, but the right hon. Gentleman is doing exactly what he always does. He just stands up and uses these phrases. The honest answer is that I do not think he knows what those phrases mean and what the implications of those phrases are. We will be protecting jobs in the UK with a good trade relationship with the European Union—enhancing and increasing jobs in the UK, and by the way I see that the right hon. Gentleman has not referred to this week’s employment figures, which show employment up in this country as a result of this Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: What the Prime Minister clearly did not have time to mention was the rising levels of in-work poverty, personal debt and the problems that people face in surviving at work. The door of her office might be open, but the minds are closed—[Interruption.] The Prime Minister is clearly not listening—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. People making an extraordinary noise from a sedentary position do not have the slightest prospect of being called to ask a question, unless it is on the Order Paper. I hope that they realise that and recognise their own folly.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Across the country, people are worried about public services, their living standards and rising levels of personal debt. While a third of the Prime Minister’s Government are at the billionaires’ jamboree in Davos, she says she is listening, but rules out changes on the two issues where there might be a majority: against no deal and for a customs union—part of Labour’s sensible Brexit alternative. If the Prime Minister is serious about finding a solution, which of her red lines is she prepared to abandon? Could she name a single one?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman makes claims about minds being closed and asks about red lines. Why does he not come and talk about it? He talks about what people up and down this country are seeing. I will tell him what we have just seen this week: borrowing this year at its lowest level for 16 years; the International Monetary Fund saying we will grow faster than Germany, Italy and Japan this year; UN figures showing foreign direct investment in the UK up last year; the employment rate up; the number of people in work up; and wages up—and the biggest threat to all of that would be a Labour Government.

Q2. [908730] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): North Warwickshire and Bedworth voted overwhelmingly to leave the EU in 2016, and from the many conversations I have had with constituents since, I am in absolutely no doubt that if they were asked again, they would vote the same way. Does the Prime Minister agree therefore that there is no credibility in the argument for a second referendum and that our constituents want this Parliament to do what it promised and honour the referendum result, which, as Opposition Members seem to have forgotten, was to leave the EU?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Not just he, I and all Conservative Members, but all Labour Members stood on manifesto pledges to respect the result of the referendum and to leave the EU. I have set out several times my concern about returning to the British people in a second referendum. People sent a clear message. We asked them to make a choice, they made that choice, and we should deliver on it.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I join the Prime Minister in marking Holocaust Memorial Day. It is important that we reflect on man’s inhumanity to man at that time and subsequently, most recently towards the Rohingya people. More must be done to eradicate the risk of genocide that is suffered by peoples throughout the world.

Last November, the Government published an economic analysis of Brexit that looked at four scenarios, but it did not include the Prime Minister’s deal. Has she done an economic analysis of her deal?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman obviously looked carefully at the economic analysis, and he will have seen that it looked at the impact of different issues in relation to the trade relationship and set that out very clearly. It made it absolutely clear that the proposal the Government had put on the table was the best in terms of delivering on the referendum result, maintaining people’s jobs and enhancing the economy.
Ian Blackford: I can only take it from that answer that there is no analysis of the Government’s plan. According to the paper last November, Brexit will lead to the loss of up to 9% of GDP throughout the UK. That will cost jobs. It is the height of irresponsibility for the Prime Minister to bring to Parliament a deal for which we have not seen the economic impact. People up and down the UK are going to lose their jobs and economic opportunities because of the ideology of this Government. It is important that the House reflects on that and on the economic security of our citizens. We have to be honest with people. We need to go back to them, have a people’s vote and let them determine what should happen.

The Prime Minister: We have been reflecting on the economic security of our citizens across the whole of the UK, and that is why we put forward the proposals that we did last summer and why the proposals in the deal—in the political declaration—we negotiated with the EU set out an ambitious future trade deal. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to reflect on the interests of the citizens of Scotland, he should reflect on the fact that being part of the UK—[Interruption.] He says he wants to know the figures and the economic analysis. In that case, it is no good his dismissing the figures and the economic analysis that show that being part of the UK is worth £10 billion in additional public spending and nearly £1,900 for every single person in Scotland. If he is interested in economics, he should want to stay in the UK and stop his policy of independence.

Q3. [908731] Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I can tell the Prime Minister that the people of Romford remain rock solid for leaving the European Union on 29 March. They do not want an extension of article 50; they do not want another referendum; they want out, deal or no deal. Will the Prime Minister assure the House that she will deliver on the biggest vote of the British people in history, come what may?

The Prime Minister: Yes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is not just an arbitrary date. It is a date to which the House effectively agreed when it triggered article 50, because it understood that the article 50 process was a two-year process, and, as I said in response to the Leader of the Opposition, that process will end on 29 March 2019. I do not believe that extending article 50 resolves any issues, because at some point Members must decide whether they want a no-deal situation, to agree a deal, or to have no Brexit.

Q4. [908732] Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My constituent Denis Omondi is a British citizen. He has uncontested custody of his young daughter Ann, who is in Kenya. Although he visits her as often as he can, she has been denied a visa because the Home Office claims that he has not spent enough time with her. The problem is that Denis is a serving soldier in the British Army. He is stationed at Fort George, and has served tours in Afghanistan, Iraq and Cyprus at the behest of the UK Government.

Does the Prime Minister believe that this situation is fair? Will she look into how this loyal soldier and loving father can be reunited with his daughter?

The Prime Minister: Let me first thank Denis for his commitment to serving in our armed forces. All our armed forces do an incredibly important and brave job for us.
concentration camps and the absolute horror of the Holocaust. We should all remember that, and remember genocides that have, sadly, occurred since, and condemn hatred and prejudice in all its forms, including antisemitism wherever it is found. There is no place for racial hatred in our society. I apologise because I suspect I may not be able to attend the performance my hon. Friend referred to, but I hope she will pass on my thanks to the choir for coming here and for the work it is doing.

Q8. [908736] Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister promised after the Grenfell Tower fire that she would do whatever it takes to keep our people safe. Today, 19 months on, the vast majority—85%—of the hundreds of blocks draped in exactly the same highly flammable cladding are still covered in it. The Shurgard fire in Croydon shows that Grenfell is just the tip of the iceberg. Thousands of council and private buildings across the country do not have sprinklers, despite the fire services saying they are essential. The Government do not even collect data on the number of fires in tower blocks. As the Prime Minister wastes billions on her no-deal gamble there is a stench of complacency about these things that matter too. When will the Prime Minister be able to tell this country that she has honoured her promise?

The Prime Minister: It is obviously very important for all of us that people are able to feel and be safe in their homes, and I understand residents’ concerns over this issue of cladding. We fully expect building owners in the private sector to take action and make sure that appropriate safety measures are in place. Interim measures are in place where necessary on all of the 171 high-rise private residential buildings with the unsafe ACM—aluminium composite material—cladding, but permanent remediation is rightly the focus, and we have repeatedly called on private building owners not to pass costs on to leaseholders. As a result of our interventions 212 owners have either started, completed or have commitments in place to remediate; 56 owners are refusing to remediate. We are maintaining pressure on this but we rule nothing out.

Q9. [908737] Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): In May 2018, Michel Barnier said that the only frictionless model for the future relationship with the UK would be Norway-plus—Norway being part of the single market, plus a customs union. This means that a Norway-plus Brexit would eliminate the need for the backstop and would also be agreed rapidly, thereby eliminating the need to extend article 50. If the Prime Minister really wants to do away with the backstop and really wants to leave the EU on 29 March without the need for an extension, why does she not pivot to the Norway-plus option today?

The Prime Minister: First, it is not the case that that is the only way to provide frictionless trade between the United Kingdom and the European Union. Other options have been put on the table. The question of the extent of that frictionless trade will be a matter for the second stage of the negotiations.

West Midlands Economy

Q11. [908739] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the prospects for the economy in the west midlands; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to say to my hon. Friend that thanks to our economic record there are 90,000 more small businesses in the west midlands since 2010, that the national living wage is giving more than 170,000 people a pay rise in the west midlands this year and that employment in the west midlands has risen by 252,000 since 2010. I can also tell him that we will continue to support the region by investing more than £430 million as part of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull local enterprise partnership.

Michael Fabricant: As ever, that is great news for the west midlands and it shows our firm economic policy, but will my right hon. Friend now welcome the new Birmingham airport masterplan, which addresses its growth in services for businessmen and holidaymakers for the west midlands? Will she also commit the Government to work with the airport to help it to expand its long-haul route network, which is so important for the businesses and holidaymakers of Lichfield and beyond?

The Prime Minister: We are certainly supporting airports beyond Heathrow, such as Birmingham, to make the best use of their existing runways. I am happy to welcome Birmingham’s decision to publish this masterplan because I understand that, as my hon. Friend says, it aims to attract new long-haul routes in addition to the routes that it already runs. We are also committed to improving access to Birmingham airport. For example, by 2026 the airport will be served by HS2, which will significantly reduce journey times to London and dramatically increase the catchment area of the airport.

Engagements

Q13. [908742] Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 23 January. Even though Brexit is turning out to be very different from what voters were promised by the leave campaign,
is the Prime Minister now effectively saying to voters, in opposing a people’s vote, that they had their say three years ago and they must now just put up and shut up?

**The Prime Minister:** What we are saying is that this House overwhelmingly voted to have the referendum in 2016 and for people to be asked for their choice as to whether to leave or to stay in the European Union. There will have been a variety of reasons why people voted to leave the European Union in 2016. Many wanted an end to free movement, and that is what we will be delivering. For many, it was about sovereignty, and that is why ending the jurisdiction of the European Court is important. Independent trade policy is also part of it, and that is what the Government are delivering. We are delivering on the vote that took place and ensuring that we do it in a way that protects jobs and gives people certainty for the future.

Q12. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): Ten years ago, I had a cervical smear test that picked up some abnormalities which, if they had been left untreated, could have developed into something much more serious. Unfortunately, cervical screening is at 21-year low and more than a quarter of women do not take up this life-saving test. We all know that it can be a bit uncomfortable, and it can be embarrassing for some women, but will the Prime Minister please urge all women up and down the country to take up this life-saving test?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend’s experience shows exactly why it is so important for women to take up this test. We need to do more to encourage women to take up their cervical screening tests, and Public Health England will shortly launch a national campaign to highlight the risks of cervical cancer and encourage women to attend the screening appointments. I can stand here as the Prime Minister and say that I know what it is like to go through a cervical smear test, and it is not comfortable. For some it will be embarrassing, and it is sometimes painful, but those few minutes can save lives, so I would encourage all women to take up their smear tests.

**John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): On the Monday before Christmas, my constituent Nathan Garrett, aged 18, was referred by his GP for emergency mental health support. On the Tuesday, he was helping others and delivering my Christmas cards, just as he had delivered many election leaflets over the years. Later, he asked the crisis team for emergency help, but none was forthcoming. On the Wednesday, Nathan went missing. On the Thursday, I learned at the volunteers’ event that we hold every Christmas, when I was expecting to see Nathan, that it had all got too much for him and that he had taken his own life.

Nathan Garrett was a brilliant, engaging, kind young man. He was a county athletics champion, a talented and brilliant musician, and incredibly popular. His parents and his grandmother are here today. Does the Prime Minister agree that when a teenager needs emergency mental health support, that support should be available within 24 hours? Will she ask the appropriate Minister to meet me and Nathan’s family to push that matter forward today?

Q14. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): Almost a year ago, the authorities in Telford agreed to commission an inquiry into child sexual exploitation in our town after a lengthy campaign by victims and their families, who were seeking justice and answers. The promised inquiry has not happened. There is no chairperson and no start date. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the failure to hold the promised inquiry lets down victims, survivors and our community? Will she join me in urging the Telford authorities not to sweep the matter under the carpet, but to deliver on their promises and to start the inquiry now?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. The crimes were utterly appalling. That is why we have given tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation the highest priority, and it is concerning, as my hon. Friend said, that the inquiry has taken so long to start, having been announced in the spring of last year. It is in the interests of victims and survivors that the inquiry is up and running as soon as possible. People deserve to see that inquiry taking place, and I will ensure that a Home Office Minister meets my hon. Friend to discuss that further.

**Stewart Hosie** (Dundee East) (SNP): At Prime Minister’s questions last October, I asked the Prime Minister about my constituent Hassan Mirza and his 10-year battle simply to renew his passport. I wrote to the Prime Minister and received a holding response two months ago. Since then, Hassan’s uncle has passed away, but he could not attend the funeral. His wife is ill, but he cannot visit her or his children. This is unacceptable. When will the Prime Minister finally give me a detailed answer, and when will she get a grip on the failings in the Home Office?

**The Prime Minister:** I can only apologise to the hon. Gentleman that he has not had a detailed answer from me before now. I will ensure that he gets one but, more than that, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is happy to meet him to discuss the case.

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to my constituent Bob Woodward, who sadly died on Sunday? When Bob’s son Robert was diagnosed with cancer aged eight in 1976, he founded the charity CLIC—Cancer and Leukaemia in Childhood. Over the following decades, he changed lives by raising over £100 million in support of worthy causes. He was an inspirational figure and a great and compassionate man, and he recently had a new Great Western Railway train named after him. Will my right hon. Friend also join me in offering our condolences to his friends and family?
The Prime Minister: I am certainly happy to join my hon. Friend in expressing our sympathies and condolences to Bob Woodward’s friends and family and in paying tribute to Bob. After tragically losing his son to cancer, as my hon. Friend pointed out, he dedicated his life to young cancer patients and their families and was able use his success as a property developer to provide residences where families of young cancer patients could live while their child is receiving treatment. It is a fitting legacy that there are now 10 of these properties in the UK, and CLIC is now a global organisation raising funds for the care of families around the world. Bob Woodward suffered a terrible tragedy with the loss of his son, but he ensured that his work throughout his life is benefiting others.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): This morning I received a letter from Santander saying that it is closing the branch in Middleton and suggesting that my constituents should avail themselves of banking services at Middleton post office, which in turn is being franchised into the back of WH Smith. Can the Prime Minister say what her policy is for our high street, other than just managed decline?

The Prime Minister: Obviously individual banks take commercial decisions, and it sounds as if there will still be post office services available on the high street to which the hon. Lady refers. We are concerned about helping to manage our high streets and ensuring that we have good high streets for the future. That is why, in the Budget, the Chancellor announced funding that is available to local authorities to work on plans for their high streets.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in reassuring the people of North Wiltshire and, indeed, the nation that, despite yesterday’s announcement that he is to move his corporate headquarters and two senior executives to Singapore, the commitment of Dyson to Britain remains undiminished, as evidenced by the £200 million he is investing in his research and development site at Hullavington and by the £40 million he is investing in the engineering and design college at Malmesbury? He is totally and utterly committed to Great Britain, and yesterday’s announcement has no effect at all on that commitment.

The Prime Minister: Dyson is clear that it will continue to have a long-term future in the UK, and it has trebled its workforce to 4,800 over the past five years. Of course, what matters to companies like Dyson is having a Government who are unapologetically pro-business, which this Government are, and a Government who are ensuring that our balanced economic policy sees increasing employment, exports and foreign direct investment in UK companies at record highs.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Mr Speaker, may I wish you, the Prime Minister and everybody here a very happy Cumbria Day? A vast array of produce is available: beer from Kirkby Lonsdale; relish from Hawkshead; deli sh pies; and tea and coffee from Penningtons—all the stuff the Prime Minister might need for a packed lunch if she is considering a walking holiday anytime soon. I remind her that, after London, Cumbria contains Britain’s biggest tourism destination, but today Cumbria has come to London. I invite her and, indeed, everybody here to come and join us in the Jubilee Room straight after PMQs to sample the best of Cumbria.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a one-man tourist board, and we are grateful to him.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) has done a good job of promoting the benefits of Cumbria, and I am sure he will be joined by my hon. Friends and others from across the House. I thank him for listing the very many items I might want to put in my packed lunch when I go on a walking holiday, but I am afraid I am bound to say that, although I recognise that Cumbria has good produce, Berkshire has good produce, too.
Courts IT System

12.43 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on the failure of the central courts IT system.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am grateful for the opportunity to update the House on the IT issues facing the Ministry of Justice over recent days.

I start by apologising to those who have been affected by the intermittent disruption, which was caused by an infrastructure failure in our supplier’s data centre. Although services have continued to operate and court hearings have continued, we know how frustrating this is for everyone. The issue is that some of our staff in the Courts and Tribunals Service, the Legal Aid Agency, probation and Ministry of Justice headquarters have been unable to log on to their computers, but we have contingency plans in place to make sure that trials can go ahead as planned.

The Prison Service has not been affected and—to correct inaccurate reporting—criminals have not gone free as a result of the problem. We have been working closely with our suppliers, Atos and Microsoft, to get our systems working again, and yesterday we had restored services to 180 court sites, including the largest ones. Today, 90% of staff have working computer systems.

Work continues to restore services and we expect the remainder of the court sites to be fully operational by the time they open tomorrow morning. We are very disappointed that our suppliers have not yet been able to resolve the network problems in full.

This afternoon, the permanent secretary, Sir Richard Heaton, will meet the chief executive of Atos and write personally to all members of the judiciary. I am very grateful to all our staff who have been working tirelessly and around the clock, alongside our suppliers, to resolve the issues.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question, and the Minister for her reply.

Members will be concerned by the failure of the multiple vital IT systems that our courts require, including systems supplied by Atos and Microsoft. Indeed, I saw those failures at first hand last week, when I visited one of the Crown courts. The chair of the Criminal Bar Association described our courts system as being “on its knees” following that failure, and blamed “savage cuts to the MoJ budget”.

Reports in The Times suggested that there is a risk of defendants being released before trial. Will the Minister confirm whether any defendants have been released without trial? What costs has the failure incurred? Have Atos and Microsoft paid any penalties for failures on the contracts so far? Can the Minister guarantee that all costs arising from the failures will be recovered from the suppliers?

Of course, such failings do not happen in a vacuum. The Ministry of Justice has faced cuts of 40% in the decade to 2020. The Government are pursuing a £1.2 billion courts reform programme, which has seen hundreds of courts close, thousands of court staff cut and a rush to digitise many court processes. Are the plans to cut 5,000 further court staff by 2023 still being pursued?

Will the Minister explain why the Government ignored the Association of Her Majesty’s District Judges, which called for courts closures to be stopped until fully functioning IT systems are demonstrated to be up and running successfully?

Finally, will the Minister now commit to a moratorium on further cuts, closures and digitisation of our courts until a Bill has been brought to the House so that we can fully scrutinise the Government’s plans?

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful for the opportunity to answer the points that the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) raised. She suggested that the problems are related to cuts—they are not. They relate to an issue in a contractual supplier’s system. She suggested that defendants were being released. I hope she heard in my initial reply that that was incorrect reporting. No prisoners have been released.

The prison system is different from the MOJ’s and I repeat that no prisoners have been released as a result of the problem.

The hon. Lady asked about penalties. As I said, the permanent secretary is meeting the supplier’s chief executive this afternoon and of course we will look carefully at the contracts, which include penalty clauses.

The hon. Lady suggested that the issue is related to a rush to digitisation. I would like to clarify that Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service operates on a legacy system, which needs to be updated because issues arise in it, and we are therefore investing significantly in our digitisation programme to ensure that our courts system runs well in the future.

The hon. Lady asked about cuts. I started with that and I will end with it, as she did. We are not cutting our justice system and our Courts Service. Indeed, as she rightly identified, we are putting £1 billion into it.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am glad to have the Minister’s reassurance that this situation has nothing to do with the common platform, as that is indeed the case. Does she accept that senior members of the judiciary, as I know from my conversations with them, are most anxious that the roll-out of the common platform proceeds, because the difficulties come from the failures of the old system? Will she ensure that the new initiatives that we are bringing in, such as digital portals, are fully and robustly tested before they come into use, so that court users can have full confidence in them?

Lucy Frazer: As always, my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Justice Committee makes important points. I am pleased to clarify that the common platform is not affected—it is being trialled—and that in fact the reform programme in its totality is not affected by these issues. Our divorce and probate application systems are not affected. As I said, the point of reform is to ensure that these systems work in future—my hon. Friend referred to the need to ensure that our systems work—and we will be carrying out a rigorous evaluation of our court reform programme.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Prisons being issued urgent notifications, private probation services needing bailouts, trials collapsing because of disclosure
Lucy Frazer: As I identified at the start, this issue was caused by an infrastructure failure in our supplier’s data centre. It is not the result of cuts. My Department received some funding in relation to the building of a prison in the recent Budget, and it received investment into the courts service and into its estates. We are investing £1 billion in our courts service.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I should declare that as a judge my husband has been affected by these outages, and I am lobbied heavily on this matter at home. In the light of that, I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed my understanding that 75% of court staff are now back online and working normally. When will the rest of them be?

Lucy Frazer: I am disappointed that my hon. Friend’s husband, whom I should declare I know, is affected, and I send my apologies to him. Indeed, more seriously, I send my apologies to all court staff, judges and professionals who have been affected. This has obviously been a disruption to their business and I am truly sorry for that. As my hon. Friend mentioned, we are working hard to ensure that these issues are resolved, and in fact 90% of staff have working computer systems today. We expect our court sites to be fully operational by the time they open tomorrow morning.

Mr Speaker: It looks as though an end to domestic lobbying is in sight. I am sure the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) is extremely appreciative of that important fact.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): We have heard that this incident has caused a great deal of disruption for the judicial system, and the Minister has apologised to staff, but will she also take into account the very many individuals who are awaiting court sentencing and appearances? They have undergone unbelievable stress and gone through a great deal of personal sacrifice and disruption because of this incident, so will she apologise to them and ensure that future investment in the Ministry of Justice ensures that this does not happen again?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady makes an important point. It is of course users who are at the heart of the justice system. Professionals work in the justice system, but they and the system work for justice for individuals. This morning I was at a court that was functioning—I was sitting at a hearing—and of course there is that continuous reminder that we are there to serve people who want to get justice done.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I declare an interest, because I am still a member of the Criminal Bar Association. I am grateful to the Minister for her assurances that this situation is not related to cuts, but the simple truth of it is that if we had a better, more fully funded system, there would be proper back-ups and this rumbling problem would have been sorted out a long time ago. I am afraid I share the views of the chairman of the Criminal Bar Association. The system is now reaching crisis point and funding is primarily a problem, but it is not just about money; we could spend the money in better ways. I would be grateful if the Minister would meet me and other members of the Criminal Bar in particular to discuss how we can sort out what is, I am afraid to say, a broken system.

Lucy Frazer: My right hon. Friend has a great deal of expertise in this subject area and I am always happy to meet her and to speak with her. She talked about back-ups, and I should say that it is because we have recently invested in the courts service that we had wi-fi back-up. The issue was in relation to the server, but because we have invested in wi-fi in courts up and down the country, many staff could continue to work during this incident.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the criminal Bar; I am a big supporter of the independent criminal Bar, as I am of solicitor advocates, who play a vital role in the delivery of justice, which is why we have recently given them £23 million more for the advocates’ graduated fee scheme. We are investing in encouraging them and hope that they continue to do their work.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): As we must do this, may I declare a personal, rather than a pecuniary, interest? I have been married to a senior member of the west London magistracy for many, many years. Mrs Pound is incandescent with fury, because those on her particular bench find it impossible to operate within the common platform. The iPads with which they have been issued are useless, and many defence barristers and solicitors are having to print out copies of the documentation before they come to court. Will the Minister accept that it is our unpaid magistracy who have been making this system work despite the IT nightmare? Will she take this opportunity, on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government, to pay tribute to and thank the magistrates for making a broken system work?

Lucy Frazer: I am honoured that we have so many well-connected Members of Parliament present in the House to share with us their personal knowledge of the justice system. I thank the hon. Gentleman’s wife for all the work she does. I do indeed recognise the significant contribution that the magistracy makes. I was pleased to go to the Magistrates Association annual conference late last year. Magistrates do indeed make a significant contribution to our criminal justice system.

Mr Speaker: I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman will present a copy of the Official Report, when it appears tomorrow, to Mrs Pound, or Maggie, as I think she is known.

Stephen Pound: Very good, Sir!

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The listing team in Chelmsford administers the calendars and diaries for all Essex and Suffolk magistrates and county courts—that is more than 30 different courts sitting every day—so when the computer systems have been down it has been
Lucy Frazer: As a diligent MP working for her constituency, my hon. Friend raised the particular issue of the Chelmsford courts with me yesterday, and I was pleased to tell her yesterday that Chelmsford Crown court was included in the sites that were fixed last night. We are currently working on, and perhaps might even have fixed, the combined family and county court, and hope that they will be online. I can confirm to my hon. Friend that this incident was not the result of a cyber-attack.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that it is not quite fair to characterise this as a single or unusual event, and that her Department has been receiving reports of failures in the criminal justice secure email service for at least six months now?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. In fact, there were two separate incidents in relation to the HMCTS-MOJ site: one that occurred on Tuesday night, which was fixed by the weekend; and a separate incident that occurred on Sunday, which we are continuing to work through. The issue he identifies in relation to the secure system is, again, separate and unrelated. Some 75,000 people were affected by that, which is only 12.5%. By Monday, we had restored user access to 40,000 of those people. We restored access to the remainder on Tuesday, and we have dealt with the issue. I hope people will identify that issues are occurring, and HMCTS is working through the night to resolve these issues. As I have mentioned, I hope that they will be fully resolved by tomorrow morning.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I, too, declare my interest as a member of the Bar and one who well remembers the frustrations caused by the legacy system. Will my hon. and learned Friend reassure me that her teams are working around the clock to make sure that all court users have access to the reliable IT system they need?

Lucy Frazer: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Issues have arisen, but HMCTS staff have been working around the clock to resolve them. They have been working extremely hard, and I would like to thank them for that work. Issues have arisen, but we have attempted to resolve them as quickly as possible.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What compensation will be made available to victims of crime who wait so long to get justice, and to other court users who often give up days of work? There is a massive loss of productivity in the system already, and issues such as this continue to aggravate the situation. Will there be a compensation system that is open, so that people can claim back for such lost productivity and make other claims they may have in relation to this matter?

Lucy Frazer: The issue that has arisen relates mainly to email systems. There has been minimal disruption. I am told, to the courts system as a whole. Obviously, where issues arise, we will investigate them and look into them thoroughly. Our whole programme of reform is intended to ensure that the users are at the heart of the system and that we ensure swift justice, with effective hearings delivered in the most efficient manner to ensure justice for everybody.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I must say it is a relief to hear that the Prison Service was not affected by this problem. Will the Minister reassure me completely that there is no prospect that any criminal hoping this may allow them to escape justice or be released slightly earlier will benefit? In essence, they will be very disappointed.

Lucy Frazer: I am very glad to give the confirmation that the Prison Service system is a different IT system and no defendant has been released as a result.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My constituents have contributed £43 million to the stalled digitisation process, thanks to the closure and sale of Hammersmith magistrates and county courts. Their reward is to travel for an hour or more to courts at Clerkenwell or Hendon. The Minister says the courts system is running well; it is not: it is in freefall. Will she at least postpone any further closures until she can guarantee a working service?

Lucy Frazer: I know the hon. Gentleman does a great deal of work in this area; he is very involved in the local law centre and has a great deal of knowledge. He will therefore be aware that we have recently consulted on what our guidelines should be in relation to any future closures. We will be guided by the response to that consultation, which is due out shortly.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Remote and rural constituencies will often benefit most from technology—especially in my own constituency, where the regrettable closure of Skegness court means there is even greater reliance on it. May I urge the Minister to bear in mind that the use of technology will always produce more good than harm if it is done properly, and that she should proceed on the basis of that maxim?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Technology has opened the door—not just in justice, but in all areas of our lives—to more efficient and progressive ways of doing things. However, technology should always be our servant, not our master. We in the Ministry of Justice would like to ensure that technology will enable answers, not frustrate traditional ones. The technology that will be rolled out in hearings—if we have video hearings, for example—will always be used at the discretion of the judge, and we will ensure that it enables, not restricts, justice.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Earlier this week, a constituent contacted me because of MOJ cuts. He is concerned that Newcastle county court is at least 22 staff short and is two months behind with its workload. As well as overstretched staff having the added problem of the IT failure, he is extremely concerned that they
cannot deliver for the people they are there to serve. How does the Minister respond to these legitimate concerns?

Lucy Frazer: Of course, where there are particular concerns in any particular court, I am happy to look at them. If the hon. Lady would like to write to me or meet me, I would be happy to discuss any particular concerns.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Minister says that she wants the user at the heart of the system. Under this Government, Wrexham in north-east Wales is run by an administrator in Llanelli in south-west Wales. That has led to our having a magistrates court without any cells—the equivalent of a pub without any beer—and the result is that the users have to go to a different town. All of this is as a result of Ministry of Justice incompetence. How can we have confidence in the administration of the justice system when this sort of chaos is an everyday occurrence?

Lucy Frazer: A number of people, such as the hon. Gentleman, have referred to court closures. In circumstances where 41% of our courts were used at less than half their available capacity last year, it is incumbent on a Government to look at where they should use their resources and where they should use their resources well. All money from court closures goes back into the courts system, and we ensure that the money is spent and spent well on our justice system.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): When the Government closed Scunthorpe magistrates and family courts, against the wishes of local people, much was made of the way in which digitisation would mitigate the risk of threats to access to justice. Given this shambles, what evaluation is being done of whether, where there have been court closures, access to justice is still being delivered effectively?

Lucy Frazer: It is vital that we continue to reform our courts and to take advantage of what technology offers us. We have had extremely positive reports from people who are using our online services, such as our online applications for probate, online applications for divorce and—I was in a social security tribunal this morning—online applications for social security tribunals. There is the fact that people can get updated on their social security hearing on their mobile phone, and the fact that we are now piloting the ability of a judge to email and liaise with a tribunal applicant before they get to court so that their hearing is ready, effective and useful when they get there. We of course evaluate this at each stage. Our systems are user-based and have been adapted because of the feedback we have had from users in the course of using them, but we will be evaluating the reform programme overall.

Ancient Woodland Inventory (England)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.8 pm

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): In the year that the Government have designated the year of green action, I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the periodic updating of the Ancient Woodland Inventory for England; and for connected purposes.

Colleagues may be relieved to learn that this Bill is all bark and no Brexit, so it is going to be a change. As any Member of this House who has watched my recent videos on YouTube explaining parliamentary Committees will know, I am a tree hugger, and I am proud of it. I am a member of the all-party group on ancient woodlands and veteran trees, which is so ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), because I am fighting to save them—all of them.

Ancient woodlands are an irreplaceable habitat and cover only 2.6% of land in the UK—that is 2.6% that we know of, so there could be a lot more. I cannot say whether that is the case, because the database that records ancient woodland in England, the ancient woodland inventory, is out of date.

I am introducing this Ancient Woodland Inventory (England) Bill because the present inventory is outdated and, as a result, has many inaccuracies and omissions that need to be corrected. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government introduced an updated national planning policy framework last July, which included long-overdue protections for ancient woodland. The framework makes it clear that developments that damage or destroy ancient woodlands should be refused except in exceptional circumstances. That is fabulous news, and the Secretary of State has my thanks for that, but, in order to protect those ancient woodlands, we do need to know where they are.

The existing inventory has become an essential reference tool for planners, developers, landowners, foresters, conservationists and others who are keen to protect and restore these irreplaceable wooded habitats. It tells us, for instance, that HS2 will destroy at least 56 hectares of this irreplaceable habitat. Indeed, the number of hectares of all threatened ancient woodlands is now at 811.

The inventory was originally developed back in the 1980s when computerised mapping was in its infancy—as were a good many hon. Members—and the lack of updates to it has meant that it is missing data. This has, in some cases, resulted in ancient woodlands being lost or damaged by development or mismanagement simply because they are not recorded in that inventory. That is particularly true of smaller sites that are often not yet recorded. Our knowledge of different types of wooded habitats and their values has increased, particularly our understanding of ancient wood pastures.

Significant steps have also been taken to restore some ancient woodlands damaged by conifer plantations, yet these positive changes also go unrecorded. The basic methods for identifying ancient woodland have not changed but, as I mentioned earlier, the policy and technology have—as have public awareness, appreciation, expertise and research—which makes a full update both more feasible and more urgent.
Small sites have regularly suffered due to this inaccuracy. There are few sites smaller than 2 hectares—that is 5 acres in old money, so not that small—recorded in the inventory, yet we know that they exist, and they are often the most at risk of loss or damage. A simple comparison between ancient maps and the inventory, which can be done relatively simply in this computerised age, shows countless small sub-2-hectare copses of ancient woodland that are on one map but not on the other. They are unregistered, unprotected, gone. That is the wrong attitude.

Give us examples, I hear you cry—[Hon. Members: “Give us examples!”] I will. In the Derbyshire Dales, just two months ago, a 1.25-hectare wood—that is 3 acres—stood for sale near the village of Middleton. On either side of it, ancient woodlands of some 40 hectares still stand proud. In the middle, this little clump lies forgotten. Its size means that it does not come up on the current inventory, so any planner or developer would not notice it, and could well decide to cut it down and put up some houses, caravans or even glamping pods among its hallowed groves—and do so unimpeded. Three acres is significant. It also appears on ancient maps dating back to the 1600s, so it is ancient. If it is on those ancient maps, it should be available on the inventory to planners. If the inventory were updated, the wood would be recognised. Without recognition, there is no protection.

The Government pledged to improve protections for ancient woodlands, and that means all of them. We cannot rely on out-of-date data to prop up a system that has seen countless hectares of this irreplaceable habitat lost. We have to update it.

I do not intend this to be any sort of blocking Bill to good, well-sited and much needed construction. I merely wish to ensure that the protection we have pledged ourselves to provide is backed up by the information required to make such protection real and meaningful on the ground. Indeed, it will actually help to speed up development, helping to avoid lengthy disagreements and costly proposals that have been put forward on the basis of incorrect and outdated evidence.

Much of my own constituency of Lichfield is filled with wonderful ancient woodland, which provides so many benefits and so much public good that cannot be replaced. Untilled soil is capable of storing carbon and provides a nutrient-rich mix for thousands of species of plants, fungi and lichen, and ancient oaks, alder, hazel and birch, which provide the very air we breathe as well as food and shelter for the creatures that we care about. These and so much more may be lost. This is a loss that my constituents, and doubtless hundreds of thousands of fellow constituents across the country, including those who made their voices heard in support of various Woodland Trust campaigns, are unwilling to accept.

This is what the Bill will address. If people need numeric costs—figures to satisfy their minds alongside the compelling arguments for the intrinsic value of ancient woodland—they need look no further than the strategy that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be introducing through the forthcoming England tree strategy, which will establish and confirm the benefits that we value from the trees that we cherish. Then they may see for themselves the irrereplaceability of these ancient woodlands through the numbers that they well understand.

Frustratingly, ancient woodland inventories are a devolved matter, which is why this Bill applies only to England, but hon. Members from across the House have kindly sponsored it. I hope that they might provide the necessary leadership so that the devolved Administrations can update their own inventories in my beloved Wales, as well as in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

I am introducing this Bill now because, even as I speak, unregistered, unnoticed and ignored ancient woodlands are at risk of being lost, much to the dismay of our constituents who do cherish these forgotten vales of tranquillity. Only by updating the inventory will that not happen. We need to let the people know that, by the power of this Bill, when a tree falls we will hear it.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Michael Fabricant, Sir Oliver Heald, Liz Saville Roberts, Rebecca Pow, Mr David Jones, Angela Smith, Stephen Timms, Mr Clive Betts, Henry Smith, John Mc Nally, Jim Shannon and Mr Jim Cunningham present the Bill.

Michael Fabricant accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March, and to be printed (Bill 324).

TENANT FEES BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Tenant Fees Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 21 May 2018 (Tenant Fees Bill (Programme)) and 5 September 2018 (Tenant Fees Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement at today’s sitting.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement. —[Jo Churchill.]

Question agreed to.
Tenant Fees Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that the Bill has been certified as relating exclusively to England and within devolved legislative competence. Any Divisions will be subject to double majority voting, whole House and Members representing constituencies in England.

1.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I beg to move, that this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Lords amendments 2 to 35.

Lords amendment 36, and amendment (a) in lieu.

Lords amendment 37, and amendments (a) and (b) thereto.

Lords amendments 38 to 47.

Lords amendment 48, and amendment (a) thereto.

Lords amendments 49 to 60.

Mrs Wheeler: I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the List of Ministers’ Interests.

I am delighted that today we have a final opportunity to scrutinise the Tenant Fees Bill. I am grateful for the considered contributions from hon. Members to date. In particular, I thank the members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for their pre-legislative scrutiny. I also thank the Opposition Front Benchers, the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for their constructive engagement.

It has been clear throughout that the Bill is one that we all support and that will deliver important changes in the private rented sector, improving the lives of millions of tenants. Letting fees can impose a significant burden on tenants, who often have little choice but to pay them time and again. The Bill will put a stop to such practices by banning unfair and hidden charges, making it easier for tenants to find a property at a price they are willing to pay, and saving renters an estimated £240 million in the first year alone. I know the changes may worry some in the lettings market, but agents who offer good value and high-quality services to landlords will continue to be in demand and play an important role in the sector.

Before I speak to the Government amendments made in the other place, I want to put on the record my thanks to my noble Friend and ministerial colleague Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth, who ably steered the Bill through the House of Lords, and to my noble Friend Lord Young of Cookham, who assisted. I also thank all peers who contributed positively to the debate. The Bill has benefited from their constructive engagement and scrutiny. Finally, I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), for his efforts in leading the Bill through this House last year.

I believe the Lords amendments strengthen the Bill and respond to many concerns raised during the debate in this House. Lords amendments 1, 2, 5 to 12, 15 to 18, 28 to 35, 49 and 55 are minor and technical amendments that ensure consistency in the Bill and that the Bill best delivers on the policy intent. Lords amendment 5 clarifies that letting agents are prohibited from requiring a tenant or relevant person to enter into a contract with themselves—for example, for additional services such as providing an inventory. Lords amendment 1, 2, 6 to 12 and 28 to 35 replace references to “tenant” with references to “relevant person”. Amendment 55 changes a reference to “incorrect and misleading information” to “false and misleading information”, to align with other references in schedule 2. Amendment 15 to 18 ensure that the language around “day” and “date” in clause 11 is consistent, and amendment 49 makes it clear that the definition of a television licence in paragraph 9 of schedule 1 applies to the entire Bill.

I know that many hon. Members feel passionately about capping tenancy deposits. The issue has been discussed in great detail in both Houses, and we have listened carefully to the arguments made. That is why we tabled Lords amendments 36 and 37 to lower the cap on deposits to five weeks’ rent for properties where the annual rent is less than £50,000; where the annual rent is £50,000 or more, the deposit cap will remain at six weeks’ rent. The vast majority of tenants will be subject to a deposit cap of up to five weeks’ rent. The higher six-week deposit cap will apply only to properties where the monthly rent is £4,167 or more. Valuation Office Agency data show that across England the median monthly rent is significantly less than that. The upper quartile monthly rent for properties with four or more bedrooms in London is £3,142. The higher deposit cap is intended to apply not to the bulk of the private rented sector, but to high-end rentals—a niche area of renting where the costs involved are greater, making a deposit cap of six weeks’ rent more appropriate.

The Government took a balanced view. We wanted to ensure that landlords had sufficient financial security and flexibility for their properties, but recognised concerns that a six-week cap for all tenants might not best deliver the changes to affordability that are needed at the lower end of the market. Importantly, a cap of five weeks’ rent for properties with an annual rent of less than £50,000 extends the benefits of the deposit cap to an estimated one in three tenants. I am sure hon. Members agree that that is a laudable outcome. Also importantly, a cap at five weeks’ rent also aligns with a recommendation made by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

The amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby would lower the tenancy deposit cap to three weeks’ rent for all tenancies. Above all, the amendment would not help tenants and it risks distorting the market and causing behavioural change. Using data from deposit protection schemes, we estimate that some 93% of deposits now exceed three weeks’ rent. A cap of three weeks’ rent would greatly increase the risk of the deposit not fully covering damage to the landlord’s property or any unpaid rent.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): As a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, I am delighted that the
Government have adopted the recommendation of five weeks. Does my hon. Friend agree that having a three-week cap is a rather peculiar notion? I do not recall a single piece of evidence from any expert citing that cap. Does she agree that the evidence for such an amendment needs to be produced?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend is completely right. The evidence to the Select Committee showed that there was no reason to have a three-week cap and that five weeks was better.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Minister is absolutely right: the Select Committee was clear in its recommendation, and when the matter was discussed in the Public Bill Committee, a lot of evidence was produced to demonstrate that five weeks was a good compromise, which landlords could accept and which would benefit most tenants. The Opposition's object in proposing three weeks is purely political, enabling them to say to tenants, “We tried to get it much lower,” when in fact the result would surely be many fewer properties available in the market for renting, which would hurt our constituents.

Mrs Wheeler: I could not have put it better myself. We do not want to create a situation that encourages landlords to withdraw from the market or ask tenants for more rent in advance, thus decreasing the overall net benefit of the ban on unfair charges. Also, we do not want to legislate in a way that would disadvantage certain groups, including pet owners and those who have lived abroad or have a poor financial history.

The real risk, as we have heard throughout the parliamentary process, is that a cap of four or three weeks' rent could encourage tenants to forgo their final month's rent payment. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and peers in all parts of the other House recognised that risk and agreed that a cap of five weeks' rent was the right compromise. Lords amendments 36 and 37 are the result of cross-party work both for tenants and landlords and does not risk distorting the market. I therefore hope that the hon. Lady sees fit not to press her amendment.

Lords amendments 42 to 47 deal with default fees. The provision permitting landlords and agents to charge default fees was another area of concern for many hon. Members. We amended the Bill in this House to be clear that landlords and agents can only charge default fees that reflect reasonably incurred costs that are evidenced in writing. Many hon. Members thought that this still did not go far enough to mitigate the risk of abuse by rogue landlords and agents. We have listened carefully to the evidence and arguments made. Although we believe that a landlord or agent should be allowed to charge fees where costs arise from the fault of the tenant, we do not want inadvertently to create a back door to other charges.

That is why Lords amendments 42 to 47 limit the default fees that can be charged to late rent, or a lost key or another security device giving access to the housing. This makes it clear where a default fee can be charged. For a late payment of rent, that payment needs to have been outstanding for 14 days or more. Where applicable, landlords or agents will be permitted to charge interest at no more than an annual percentage rate of 3% above the Bank of England's base rate for each day that the payment is outstanding. Any fee charged in respect of replacing a lost key or other security device must not exceed the landlord's or agent's reasonable costs, and must also be evidenced in writing to the person who is liable for the payment. I hope we can all agree that this approach gives landlords and agents the assurance they require while giving tenants enough certainty over what can be charged.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The Minister will recall that, during the pre-legislative scrutiny in the Select Committee, one of the issues raised was about enforcement of rights. Does she agree that it is necessary to properly fund local authorities so that they can challenge landlords who seek to charge unfair fees?

Mrs Wheeler: Yes, indeed. I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will get on to that point later in my speech, so she will have to stay and listen to the end, I am afraid.

Kevin Hollinrake: I must draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The Minister talks about agents and landlords having reassurance about being able to make reasonable charges where their action or work is required through the fault of the tenant. The Bill does make provision for this in a situation with the loss of keys, but it makes no provision for the costs of chasing late rent, despite the fact that it may take several attempts to collect it. In effect, that means that charges would be increased on the landlord at the expense of good tenants, on the basis that some bad tenants who do not pay their rent on time create a lot more work for the agent or the landlord.

Mrs Wheeler: Again, I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is so deeply imbued with knowledge of these issues that I take note of it. I think he will find that later in the Bill there is a clause that might be helpful to him.

There is also a power in clause 3 to amend the list of permitted payments, including the level of the deposit cap and types of default fees that can be charged, should this be required.
Lords amendment 48 clarifies that landlords and agents will still be able to charge for any damages for contractual breaches as they do now. On this point, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby has tabled an amendment seeking to ensure that, where a landlord or agent wishes to charge a payment for damages, they must provide evidence in writing to demonstrate that their costs are reasonable. I would like to reassure her, and other hon. Members, that that amendment is not necessary. It has never been the intention that the Bill affects a landlord or an agent’s right to recover damages for breach of contract under common law. That is why we brought forward Lords amendment 48 to clarify the position and to ensure that such payments will not be outlawed under the ban. I want to reassure hon. Members that this does not create a back door to charging fees. I repeat: it does not create a back door to charging fees. Damages are generally not meant to do anything more than put the innocent party back in the position they would have been in had the contract not been breached. No reasonableness test is therefore needed. There are already large amounts of case law that deal with what is appropriate in a damages case. If an agent or a landlord attempts to insert a clause that requires a payment—for example, saying, “If you do X, you must make a payment”—this will be prohibited under clause 1(6)(b) or clause 2(5)(b). Further, landlords or agents are required to go to court if they want to enforce a damages claim, or they could seek to recover them from the tenancy deposit. In both cases, they would need to provide evidence to substantiate any claim, and they would only be awarded any fair costs.

As such, the hon. Lady’s amendment is unnecessary. It would also not be appropriate for this Bill to start tweaking years of existing case law regarding damages payments. We are more likely to confuse the landscape than to clarify it. We are committed, on this matter, to working with Citizens Advice, Shelter and other industry groups to ensure that tenants fully understand their existing rights with regard to paying and challenging contractual damages. We have already taken steps to update our guidance to make this point clear. I hope that, with those reassurances, the hon. Lady feels able to withdraw her amendment.

Hon. Members will be aware that the Bill introduces a clear set of rules around holding deposits. This will improve transparency and provide assurances from both tenant and landlord around the commitment to entering into a tenancy agreement. To minimise the risk of abuse, Lords amendment 54 introduces a formal requirement for landlords and agents to set out in writing why they are retaining a deposit. This will empower tenants to challenge decisions that they believe to be unfair. It will also ensure that tenants do not continue to apply for properties and risk losing their holding deposit time and again without understanding why.

We also agree that it is not right that landlords and agents accept multiple holding deposits for the same property. That is why Lords amendment 41 ensures that a landlord or an agent can only take one holding deposit at any one time for a property, unless permitted to retain the earlier deposit. Lords amendment 50 will ensure that a tenant receives their holding deposit back when the tenancy agreement is entered into. Previously, it could have been the case that a landlord might have had grounds to retain the holding deposit, and done so but entered into the tenancy anyway. Further, Lords amendment 59 clarifies that a holding deposit must be refunded where a landlord or an agent imposes a requirement that breaches the ban or behaves in such a manner that it would be unreasonable to expect the tenant or relevant person to enter the tenancy. This will, for example, give tenants greater power to object where a landlord or agent has asked them to pay an unlawful fee or to enter into an agreement with unfair terms.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): This is a very stressful time for tenants; I have had a case raised with me very recently. That is particularly so for those who are forced, for one reason or another, to move frequently, which seems to happen more often in London than elsewhere, including Taunton Deane. Does the Minister agree that these amendments and this Bill are going to make a real difference to their security, particularly the fact that they have redress over the deposit issue, which is incredibly stressful if they have to try to claim it back?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend is quite right. It does seem to be a bit more of a thing in the south-east than anywhere else. Nevertheless, this Bill, which we hope to get through tonight with no ping-pong, will apply across the whole of England, and it will help tenants going forward, so I thank her for her question.

Lords amendments 13, 14, 19, 20, 38 to 40, 51 to 53 and 56 to 58 are consequental to those on holding deposits that I have just described.

I would like to discuss some amendments made to ensure that the Bill does not adversely affect organisations that were never intended to be in scope. We have taken local housing authorities and the Greater London Authority, or any organisation acting on their behalf, out of the definition of “relevant person”. Lords amendments 3 and 4 ensure that those authorities and those acting on their behalf will be able to make payments in connection with a tenancy when acting on behalf of a tenant or guaranteeing their rent.

Local authorities have a duty to help the homeless find accommodation. We recognise that, as part of this, councils may need to provide assistance to applicants—financial or otherwise—to access private rented accommodation. We do not want inadvertently to prevent a local authority from carrying out that vital work.

Further, Lords amendments 24 to 26 exclude certain licences to occupy where advice or assistance is provided in connection with the grant, renewal or continuation of the licence by charities or community interest companies. The types of licence that will be excluded are those that have been granted primarily for the provision of companionship or companionship combined with care or assistance where no rent is paid. This ensures that the important work of schemes such as Homeshare can continue. Homeshare matches a person in housing need—often a young person—with a householder, who is often elderly and needs companionship, sometimes combined with low-level care or assistance. I am sure we all agree that that is a worthy cause that was never intended to be in scope of the ban on letting fees.

Lords amendments 21 to 23 and 27 ensure that the forthcoming client money protection provisions work as intended. We want to give landlords and tenants financial security, but not in such a way as to impose disproportionate and unnecessary burdens on industry,
which might adversely impact tenants and landlords. We have clarified that money that has already been protected through a Government-approved tenancy deposit scheme is not required to be doubly protected by a client money protection scheme. That was never the policy intention.

We will also not require schemes to pay out where certain risks are excluded by insurers. Those policy exclusions typically refer to events such as war, terrorism or confiscation by the state. Neither can we expect schemes to hold insurance for every penny held by agents. Our amendments ensure that the level of insurance held by schemes is proportionate to the risk of client money being lost. We are permitting schemes to impose limits per individual claimant and aggregate limits, where they are at least equivalent to the scheme’s maximum probable loss. That is an accepted industry practice, and the Financial Services Compensation Scheme imposes such limits.

The amendments on client money protection also provide for a transitional period of 12 months after the requirement to belong to a scheme comes into force, permitting agents to join a scheme where they are making all efforts to apply for a client account but have not yet obtained one. We want to give agents sufficient time to find a bank that offers a pooled client account. Schemes will be able to work with agents to find an appropriate banking provider where they are having difficulty. I would like to be clear that the 12-month transitional period only applies in relation to applying for a pooled client account and not the requirement to belong to a client money protection scheme more broadly. That is intended to come into force on 1 April 2019, prior to the ban on fees, and as long as we do not have ping-pong.

Lords amendment 27 clarifies that the lead enforcement authority set up under the Bill can also enforce the client money protection regulations, and Lords amendment 60 is a consequential amendment to the title of the Bill. These amendments will ensure that client money protection gives tenants and landlords the financial security that they want and deserve, without imposing unreasonable and disproportionate costs on industry, which could increase costs for tenants and landlords.

Above all, these amendments improve affordability, strengthen protection for tenants and minimise the risk of abuse by the minority of rogue landlords and agents. They ensure that the Bill’s key provisions are clear and transparent on the face of the Bill, offering tenants the certainty and security that they deserve. I hope that Members will welcome the changes that have been made, which I firmly believe address the key concerns raised in this House. I am confident that the measures in the Bill will help to deliver the fairer and more affordable private rented sector that we all want to see for tenants, but also for decent, professional landlords and agents who are providing a vital service.

It is in all our interests to see this crucial legislation become law as quickly as possible and avoid any delay that ping-pong would inevitably cause. We need to allow a short period following Royal Assent to enable agents and landlords to become compliant with the new legislation. We therefore intend the provisions in the Bill to come into force on 1 June 2019, which means that the ban would apply to all new tenancies entered into on or after that date.

1.45 pm

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): Does the Minister feel, as I do, that the Bill will incentivise private landlords to give more tenancies, particularly to people who are on social benefits?

**Mrs Wheeler**: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his question.

**Bob Stewart**: Not so gallant today.

**Mrs Wheeler**: Always gallant. The Bill will help enormously to ensure landlords’ safety, while financially benefiting tenants.

**Bob Stewart**: It is for both sides.

**Mrs Wheeler**: Indeed—well said.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I think my hon. Friend is coming to the conclusion of her contribution. She mentioned when these measures will come into force for new tenancies. Could she clarify that the Bill will apply to not only brand new tenancies, where a tenant moves into a property, but also existing tenancies that are renewed by being rolled over or where the tenant remains in situ and enters into a new tenancy agreement?

**Mrs Wheeler**: I thank my hon. Friend, who has been assiduous in his time on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. The intention is for the Bill to apply to all new tenancies signed after 1 June. As he said—he must have better eyesight than anyone—I am close to concluding.

The exception to the 1 June date is the client money protection provisions in the Bill, which, as I have said, come into force on 1 April 2019. Ahead of that, we will continue to work closely with key stakeholders to support implementation of the ban. We will work with industry groups to ensure that the ban is properly communicated, and we continue to work with local authorities to ensure that they are ready to enforce it. I have already shared the draft consumer and enforcement guidance with Members, and it is now being updated to reflect the Lords amendments.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government want to act quickly on this. Given how hard-pressed local authorities are, what will the Government do to help them manage this situation?

**Mrs Wheeler**: Like my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the hon. Gentleman is prescient about what I am about to say. We are working with National Trading Standards to appoint the lead enforcement authority under the Bill. That will be a local trading standards authority appointed by the Secretary of State, and we intend the body to be in place ahead of implementation.
In conclusion, I very much hope that Members will support the amendments made by the Government and look forward to seeing the legislation implemented. I also hope that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, having heard and accepted my assurances, will withdraw her amendments.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I would like to thank the Minister for her approach and the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorkshire) (Rishi Sunak), who steered the Bill through Committee and was open to hearing the Opposition's views on this small but very important Bill.

I shall speak in support of amendment (a) to Lords amendment 36; amendments (a) and (b) to Lords amendment 37; and amendment (a) to Lords amendment 48. I shall also pay tribute to the work that has been done in Committee, where there was a lot of fruitful conversation and consideration, and in the other place, which has resulted in the Bill arriving back in the Commons in a far better state. It is not just my hard work or the Minister's hard work that has gone into the Bill. We are backed up by an enormous number of people, including charities, members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, who are listening keenly to our debate, and civil servants, who have put in many hours to make sure that the Bill is fit for purpose. I am very grateful to all those people who have participated.

In Committee and on Report, we discussed at length the default fee clause. Originally, the Government fought very hard against opposition from Labour and charities such as Shelter to remove a gaping loophole, which would have left the definition of a default to the discretion of those drafting tenancy agreements. It is interesting that Lords amendment 47 bears a striking resemblance of those drafting tenancy agreements. It is interesting that Lords amendment 47 bears a striking resemblance to amendment 3, which I pressed on Report. Back then, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorkshire), said:

“We believe it is for the tenant and the landlord to determine what it is necessary and fair to include as default charges, on a case-by-case basis. There are other potential default charges besides those for late payment of rent and lost keys.”—[Official Report, 5 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 208.]

It is welcome that the Government have rowed back on that, despite being so bullish about it during the Bill's passage through the Commons. I hope that they bear that in mind when considering amendments to future housing Bills, in which I hope to play a role, and are more thoughtful. If amendments are tabled in good faith, I hope that Government Members would accept that, and if they are not worth adopting, do so at an early stage, so that we do not appear conflicted on measures that are positive overall, particularly in this case for people in the private rented sector who are seeking a home and trying to access one.

As the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), pointed out, Labour always welcomes Government acceptance of the principles and details of our ideas, and we welcomed their acceptance of a Labour proposal in Lords amendment 47 to enshrine what counts as a default fee in the Bill. We believe that that will close a significant loophole in the Bill, moving it far closer to the type of tenant fees Bill that Labour has been proposing since 2013.

We have a number of concerns about the Lords amendments, as the Bill still does not reach its full potential to protect tenants from unscrupulous landlords who want to charge unfair fees. We are very keen to point out that this is about the unscrupulous few, not the fair-minded, reasonable and proper many who exist out there. First, Lords amendment 48 adds a new permitted payment of damages to the Bill. The Minister touched on that, so I may have to revise what I am going to say—I hope that hon. Members will bear with me. We tabled an amendment because we are concerned about Lords amendment 48, but that does not extend to a belief that damages in principle are fundamentally wrong. Landlords should not have to pay for repairs when tenants cause damage to their properties, but we do not understand why the Lords amendment is necessary, and why it seemingly misses out a number of protections that are present in other parts of the Bill.

Richard Graham: When we discussed this matter in Committee the hon. Lady was very reasonable, and seemed perfectly happy with the five-week proposal that the Government have made in the Lords amendment. It would be much easier if the hon. Lady did not press her amendment, so that we may secure confirmation across the House that this is the best way forward, especially given that there is not a single Labour Back Bencher present to support the hon. Lady's amendment.

Melanie Onn: It is a busy day in other parts of the Palace of Westminster; we should give colleagues credit for the fact that they have other work to do. I shall come on to the detail of my amendment and the issue of five weeks. I think that the hon. Gentleman has misremembered the extent of my acceptance of the five-week period. It was a reluctant acceptance at the time, with a view to tabling a further amendment if we thought that necessary. Having heard the Minister's explanation, I think that it is still necessary to press that point, and I shall address it further in my speech.

I am discussing the damages that landlords can claim if a tenancy agreement is breached, rather than the issue of deposits. I urge the hon. Gentleman to bear with me and allow me to finish making that point. The fact that this is the first reference in the Bill to claiming damages shows that the Government were confident until recently that the Bill as originally drafted would not interfere with the current system. Indeed, the Government's draft guidance, which we received from the Minister on 5 November, said:

“The Act does not affect any entitlement to recover damages for breach of contract...If a tenancy agreement does not permit a landlord or agent to charge default fees, the landlord or agent may still be able to recover damages.”

It continued:

“What is the difference between a default fee and damages? A default fee is a payment that can be required by a landlord or agent under an express provision in the tenancy agreement and would therefore be permitted under the Tenant Fees Act.”

Finally, it said:

“Can a landlord or agent recover costs for damages if they didn’t write them into the tenancy agreement? Yes. The Act does not affect the landlord’s entitlement to recover damages.”
The draft guidance that we received from the Minister’s Department only two months ago indicated on multiple occasions that the Bill would not impact on a landlord’s ability to claim damages, and it spelt out the difference between a default and a deposit. There is therefore a concern, because what was seemingly settled has become unsettled as the result of an addition which, to all intents and purposes, and given the explanation that we received, does not need to be made. What is the purpose of that? However, the Minister’s assurance on the intention to reassure landlords and innocent parties that they are of that? Does the hon. Lady think that good tenants who comply should subsidise poor tenants who do not comply?

Kevin Hollinrake: Does the hon. Lady think that good tenants who comply should subsidise poor tenants who do not comply?

Melanie Onn: I think it is absolutely right that if a landlord experiences a breach of tenancy, those tenants are considered responsible for the situation. It should not rest on others who adhere to the tenancy agreement that they signed, so I concur with the hon. Gentleman.

I really do not see why Lords amendment 47 on default fees necessitates change, as the Government clearly defined damages as separate from defaults. I therefore wonder why Lords amendment 48 is necessary in the first place. Without it, would the Bill impede the current system? Would it prevent landlords from claiming damages through deposits or the courts? Can the Government reassure me—I would say that perhaps they have done so to some extent—that Lords amendment 48 will not create powers for landlords to bypass current systems and charge as they see fit? I certainly hope that the Minister believes that to be the case. If Lords amendment 48 is not necessary, perhaps it is in the Minister’s gift to reconsider the position and remove the provision, rather than adding confusion, as it is not necessary, and previous statements have made it clear that it is not necessary.

My amendment (a) to Lords amendment 48 would bring that into symmetry with powers in the Bill and add a requirement for charges brought under the amendment to be reasonable, and to be evidenced by invoices. That is just to ensure that no loophole is sought. Throughout the debate we have discussed the need for permitted payments in the Bill to be subject to rigorous checks and balances, to ensure that unscrupulous landlords and letting agents cannot continue to charge unjustified amounts for things such as a lost key. Thanks to the hard work in both Houses, we have closed a number of loopholes that could have been exploited to allow some landlords to profit from tenants by unfair and unjustified means.

Lords amendment 48 does not contain those protections and seemingly could allow for open-ended charges without mind to the cost to the landlord, and to whether the charges could be backed up by evidence. I do not intend to press the amendment to a Division, but I would welcome additional reassurances from the Government that the principles discussed throughout the Bill will not be undermined by the Lords amendment, and that it is not a new loophole that landlords and letting agents can exploit for profit.

Mrs Wheeler: I am always willing to give the hon. Lady greater reassurance. Lords amendments 42 and 47 ensure that landlords and agents can charge default fees only in specified circumstances, which are listed in the Bill. Lords amendment 48 permits landlords and agents to recover costs for damages only in breach of contract.

Melanie Onn: I thank the Minister for that very helpful further explanation.

Another Opposition concern about the Lords amendments is that the Bill still does not go far enough to remove the barriers that high deposits pose to millions of renters across the country. Our amendments seek to address two points. The Minister says that reducing the deposit cap from five weeks to three would not help tenants, but I believe it would. A reduction of two weeks’ advance payment will of course help tenants to access properties. It would reduce barriers for private renters and enable them to access the rental markets, including for the first time. Turning that into a negative takes some extraordinary creative gymnastics, on which I congratulate the Minister.

Mr Prisk: The Select Committee looked at the Bill in detail in pre-legislative scrutiny. We all signed up to five weeks, including six distinguished Labour Members, including the Chairman, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who knows the subject well. Why does the hon. Lady believe they are wrong?

Melanie Onn: Having served on that Committee with the hon. Gentleman previously, I absolutely support its work and congratulate it, but it is always in the interests of a Select Committee to achieve consensus whenever possible and to try to agree a report that has unanimous support. That is the purpose and intention, and this case is a demonstration of excellent chairmanship and co-operation.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on playing his part in that, but it is the Opposition’s role to speak up for tenants. If we can make the process better, and if there is an opportunity for the Government to go further in assisting tenants—tenants are hard-pressed and this is a very expensive period of their lives—it is right that we speak up for them. We should try to encourage the Government to accept that they can reduce the barrier of high deposits to assist people directly. I just cannot support the view that charging more will assist renters in any way.

The Minister mentioned that I welcomed the Government’s reduction. I am delighted that they have listened to common sense and reasonableness, and that they have reduced the cap to five weeks from six, which was far too high, but it is not enough. If the Government can go further, I believe they always should.

Kevin Hollinrake rose—

Richard Graham rose—

Melanie Onn: I will move on because I am absolutely convinced that hon. Members will want to address these points in their speeches—they are committed to the subject and have taken a close interest, whether in the Bill Committee or in Select Committees. I look forward to hearing their comments in the remainder of the debate, but I will move on if that is okay.
The first point that our amendments seek to address is the financial staggering for the cap level that landlords are allowed to impose. I have sympathy with the Government’s aim of prioritising a reduction of the deposit burden on those at the cheaper end of the market, but the specific provisions in Lords amendment 36 could mean that those in joint tenancies end up being subject to the higher cap, despite individually paying significantly less in rent than is used as a threshold in the amendment. It is counterintuitive to create a cap that allows deposits to be relatively higher for someone paying £5,000 a year in rent in a 10-bed large house in multiple occupation than for someone paying £45,000 in an individual rent, so I would welcome reassurance that joint tenants will not be short-changed by the differential cap. If they will be, I would welcome an explanation of the logic behind the decision to allow those in joint tenancies to be charged relatively more.

Regardless of the functioning of the differential cap, the Lords amendment will do little for the majority of tenants in this country. The cap will have a negligible effect on the majority of deposits in the country and will allow the current system to function virtually unchanged. For the graduate who cannot afford the up-front costs to move to a city for a new job, or for the family given just two months to save enough money to find a new flat and avoid homelessness following a section 21 notice, the system is simply not fit for purpose and needs urgent change.

According to the English housing survey, a five-week rental deposit will set new tenants back an average of almost £1,000 across the country, and over a staggering £1,500 in London. For many in society who are living pay cheque to pay cheque, saving that sort of money would take an enormous amount of time, and certainly far longer than the two months that tenants are given when they are served with section 21 notices. That means that many struggle to access the flexibility that renting should offer. They fear being served notice to vacate because that could result in homelessness. That is simply not how the private rented sector should function.

Our amendments would change that. Lords amendment 36 introduces an ill-thought-through staggering system. Amendment (a) in lieu would reduce the cap on deposits from five or six weeks to three, and our amendments together will reduce deposits to three weeks for all, closing the loophole that could be opened by Lords amendment 36.

I was interested to hear the Minister’s announcement of the enactment date. A written statement is due today, which I look forward to reading. I was also interested to hear her comments in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), who is no longer in his place, on enforcement and trading standards. She said that the consumer money protection measures in the Bill would be in place before enactment. I would appreciate clarity on whether she meant enactment on 1 June 2019, which is rapidly approaching, or whether she was referring to the commencement date of April next year.

Labour’s amendments would give private rented sector tenants a very welcome helping hand at a very expensive time. If passed, the amendments would reduce the deposit barrier by almost £400 across the country, and by over £600 in London, offering significant change to tenants from all backgrounds and building a better private rented sector for the many.

Bob Blackman: I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). I had the opportunity to chair—and the challenge of chairing—the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee during pre-legislative scrutiny in the absence of the elected Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who unfortunately was undergoing health treatment at the time. I take absolutely the praise that the hon. Lady pours on me for reaching the judgment of Solomon—[Interruption.]/ Interruption. / It was possibly unintended at the time. From the outset of our pre-legislative scrutiny, on an all-party basis, we sought to balance good landlords and tenants, who are the overwhelming majority, with the small minority who are rogue landlords and rogue tenants. The risk here is the balance that is struck.

I do not intend to go over all aspects of the Bill but, clearly, I am absolutely delighted that the Government have seen fit to endorse all the Select Committee’s recommendations, especially the reduction of deposits from six to five weeks’ rent. I will again set out why we came to that conclusion. As Members might recall, we had a long discussion about it in Committee. Some promoted the concept of a six-week deposit and some a four-week deposit. No one but no one on the Select Committee promoted less than four weeks, for very good reasons.

Our view was that a six-week deposit was clearly too onerous for tenants. I accept what the hon. Member for Great Grimsby says about the cost to tenants of a six-week contribution, but there is also a clear risk with only a four-week deposit—or, worse still, her proposed three-week deposit—because we might get to a position in which, in the last month before the end of a six-month assured shorthold tenancy, a tenant has no incentive whatever to pay their last month’s rent. Tenants could just skip, and the landlord would then have to pursue them through the courts, bearing incredible costs unreasonably.

The issue for us was that four weeks would lead to a position whereby the tenant had an incentive to say, “Okay, I won’t pay the last month’s rent—just take it out of the deposit,” and then if the landlord could reasonably wish to claim money from the deposit because of damage or other reasons, they would have to pursue court action to recover it. That would be grossly unfair on good landlords, who are the vast majority in this country. Other members of the Committee promoted six weeks, so we ended up with the view that five weeks struck a balance between giving tenants an incentive to pay their last month’s rent, in the knowledge that they would get back their deposit had they been good tenants, and landlords being forced to go through a proper claim process to recover moneys as a result of damage by a tenant.

Richard Graham: I am afraid that the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), will not give way on this matter because she is making a purely political point by wishing to
appear to be helping tenants more, but the interesting silence in the debate so far has been from Scottish National party Members, because of course there is an eight-week deposit in Scotland. What does my hon. Friend think about that?

Bob Blackman: Clearly we are not talking about the position in Scotland, but I suspect—I might be wrong—that rental levels in Scotland are very much lower than elsewhere in our urban conurbations, and certainly in London. Scotland also perhaps has a lot more social housing than England—

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP) indicated assent.

Bob Blackman: I see the hon. Lady nodding about that point. Those two things are equally important.

Another consideration, which has not yet come out in the debate, is the economic impact of what happens with deposits. If we lowered deposits, I suggest that landlords would likely increase the rent over the period and—this is the key point—tenants would end up far worse off as a direct result, because landlords would have inflated the rent in order to recover the moneys due.

Mrs Wheeler: Let me clarify something about the ban applying to all new tenancies from 1 June. There will be a 12-month transition for tenancies signed before 1 June during which tenants can be charged. After 1 June 2020, no tenants can be charged fees banned under the Bill, which gives a clear date for when the provisions of the Bill will apply to all tenancies.

2.15 pm

Bob Blackman: I thank the Minister for that helpful intervention, which clarified her earlier remarks and what was said when I intervened on her speech.

It is reasonable to set a position whereby we are abundantly clear in the Bill—I hope it will soon become an Act—that letting agents, estate agents or whoever are working on behalf of landlords, not tenants. I therefore warmly welcome the Lords amendment on holding deposits that was wisely tabled by the Government. What happens at the moment is an absolute outrage: some unscrupulous letting agents take a variety of competing holding deposits to inflate rents by almost having an auction for rental properties. That is grossly unfair on prospective tenants who are just looking for a property, so I warmly welcome that decision. It will be a welcome change for tenants throughout the country.

I am glad about the clarity of the Lords amendments that ensure that we are clear about the charges a landlord can make, what their purposes are and what the standards of evidence must be so that tenants do not bear a ridiculous price for, say, a lost key. Any charge will have to be evidence-based—the cost of replacing keys or other such security devices will be set out—and any cost will be reasonable, not inflated. One of the problems has been that certain unscrupulous individuals have been getting away with ripping off tenants with such charges in a grossly unfair way.

I warmly welcome the Lords amendments. The whole Select Committee welcomes the fact that the Government have finally got to where we were in the first place on deposits. I trust that we will reject the spurious Opposition amendments and ensure that the Bill, which has been warmly welcomed throughout the country, rapidly becomes law so that we can implement a process that is fair for tenants.

One thing that we desperately need to introduce is a national rental deposit scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and I managed to convince the Chancellor to do that at the time of not the most recent Budget, but the one before, and money was allocated to the Department to make that happen. When the Minister sums up, I would welcome her assuring us that we will speed up the process of introducing such a scheme so that those for whom the deposit is the key issue in getting a tenancy can be funded by public money, thus protecting them and giving them the opportunity to get a tenancy and a home of their own.

Angela Crawley: As the lone Member on the SNP Benches, and given that the Bill applies solely to England, I will endeavour to keep my comments brief. The Government’s Bill is, however, welcome.

This Government are playing catch-up with the Scottish Government, who abolished tenant fees in 2011. The Scottish reforms gave tenants longer notice periods, indefinite security of tenure and limited rent rises, so it is most welcome that this Government are making changes here now. In Scotland, in many instances, money has gone back into the pockets of Scottish renters, but renters in England are currently losing out due to this Government’s inaction and failure to offer the same protections.

The Government have maintained the right-to-buy policy, but they must recognise that to give people the greatest choice and flexibility, they have to ensure that the opportunity of the right to buy is matched with an increase in home building and access to socially affordable housing. I am afraid the Government have not quite hit the mark on that yet, and people are simply being driven into the private rented sector, which limits their options and opportunities.

The Bill is very welcome. As we heard from Conservative Members, there remains the fear that this policy will mean that the costs of the abolished fees will be passed on to tenants in an underhand way, but that concern is unfounded. It has not happened in Scotland, where there has not been a significant spike in rents since the ban on fees, so I hope that the Government will take heed of that fact. Independent research commissioned by Shelter found that since 2012 landlords in Scotland had been no more likely to increase rents than landlords in other parts of the UK. Between 2012 and 2016, rents increased by 5% in Scotland, compared with 9% in England, so the abolition of tenant fees does not appear to have had a significant impact on costs.

That said, although such a policy has been shown to work in tenants’ favour, we must be vigilant about rent prices, so I hope that the Minister will outline how the Government will ensure that their policy puts tenants first. Landlords in Scotland can only increase rents with three months’ notice and no more than once a year, and tenants can contact a rent officer if they think that a rent increase is too high. I would be interested to know whether the Minister envisages similar protections and criteria for the policy in England. In Scotland, other than rent and a refundable deposit, which is capped at no more than two months’ rent, landlords cannot levy
any additional charges, which means no holding deposits, administration fees, premiums or additional charges, whether refundable or not.

Tenants are secure when landlords can end a tenancy only on strict eviction grounds. The Scottish National party commends the work of charities and campaigners who secured additional renters’ rights from the Government in the House of Lords, and both Shelter UK and Generation Rent are happy for the Bill to pass with the Lords amendments. These rights include a short definitive list limiting default fees to charges for chasing late rents and for replacing lost keys or equivalent security devices. I noted the comments made by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and I hope he is reassured that welcome mechanisms are in place. The provision closes the default fee loophole so that landlords will no longer be able to charge for a whole host of spurious defaults. It is also clear to landlords that they can continue to recover damages as they do now.

I welcomed the comments of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who, when comparing the position with the cap set in Scotland, rightly mentioned the greater availability of social housing in Scotland. He observed that a five-week cap was welcome, especially given that rents in England and Wales can be two to three times higher than those in Scotland. A five-week deposit cap is reasonable and will help renters to meet the initial fees needed to secure a home. Although Shelter originally argued for a lower cap, even it has said that it “pleased that the government didn’t stick at 6 weeks and we believe the 5-week cap will be a big improvement”.

That takes heed of the fact that costs are substantially higher in England, meaning that a five-week cap is much more reasonable.

Holding deposits are now illegal in Scotland, and that ought to be the case in England as well. Under the Lords amendments, if a tenancy does not go ahead, landlords or letting agents will be required to set out in writing the reasons why—they will also be required to give reasons for withholding some of a deposit—and they will have to do so within seven days of the decision not to progress with the tenancy. That will give tenants some clarity on exactly what happened to their money. It will also give landlords or letting agents the opportunity to rectify any offending conduct. It will also ensure that landlords who fail to comply with these provisions will be at risk of being referred to a disputes resolution service, to ensure that tenants get their money returned.

I would like to touch on two things: deposits and default fees. I will begin with Lords amendments 36 and 37. To say that three weeks would be an appropriate deposit length, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) has done, shows a complete misunderstanding of the issues. She is absolutely right to want to protect tenants—everyone in this place wants to protect tenants—but to do that we must be fair to landlords as well. She asked how a longer deposit period would help tenants. It would not help tenants not to be able to find properties to rent. If we deterred landlords from entering the marketplace, as a three-week cap would do, that would not help tenants.

I speak as somebody who has been in this business for 30 years. When I started, the only thing I could find in the marketplace was a shabby, damp, dark terraced house in the middle of York. It was not like today’s marketplace; tenants now have a breadth of choice, and that is because landlords have invested because they are treated fairly. The hon. Lady wants to treat tenants fairly, as I do, but we would not be treating them fairly if our policies resulted in their being refused tenancies by landlords worried about not getting their rent, not regaining possession of a property that had had significant damage done to it or not having enough deposit left for the remedial work. Her proposals would potentially put landlords in that situation, given that many tenants use their deposit as the last month’s rent, meaning there would be nothing left.

I still have concerns about restricting the deposit length to five weeks. As we know, it is eight weeks in Scotland. The average deposit in London is five and a half to six weeks, and in the rest of England it is not far below that, so the Bill will mean a change for many landlords, and we will have to keep this under review to make sure it does not have adverse consequences for tenants—that is the principle. Landlords are happy as long as they keep their properties well maintained and the rent is paid. If that is not the case, landlords will exit the market, which is not good for the tenants the hon. Lady looks to protect.

Bob Blackman: Does my hon. Friend recall that, during the Select Committee process, one of our considerations was that, if we set a six-week deposit limit, every landlord would rapidly move to six weeks from the current UK average of between four and a half and five and a half weeks?

Kevin Hollinrake: No. I do not agree with that because at the moment we have some flexibility. Under the Bill, we have no flexibility above five weeks. The trouble with that is this. I could charge a tenant five weeks, but what if they have a pet or certain other circumstances that make me less likely to want to rent it to them? I, as a
The Bill has returned to the Commons in a much better state than it was in when it left. The loophole relating to default fees has now gone. The detail on default fees will be on the face of the Bill, which will specify “a key…or other security device”.

There is much more transparency in relation to the holding of deposits, with a fairer transaction between letting agents and tenants, and the deposit levels are better aimed at people on low incomes, having been reduced to five weeks’ rent.

I listened carefully to both sides of the argument about the length of deposits. I listened to what was said by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), but I also listened to the counter-arguments. I entirely agree with the hon. Lady. Lady that we need to protect tenants and make the system easier for them, because there is a tough world out there for people on low incomes. I also agree that we should not inadvertently disadvantage renters. As long as we do not have the number of affordable and social homes that we need, they will always be in that tough world in which, ultimately, they are at the mercy of landlords when it comes to charges. This is only the beginning of an overall improvement for renters, and I hope very much that we will continue to make changes in the law that will make life easier for them, but I also hope that we will eventually provide the number of homes that we need in order to create an entirely fair rental market.

I pay tribute to my colleagues in the House of Lords, Lord Shipley and Baroness Grender. Lady Grender initiated these proposals in a Private Member’s Bill in 2016 and, with Lord Shipley, worked assiduously with the Government to improve the Bill. I also congratulate the groups that have long campaigned for this change in the law, including Shelter, Generation Rent and Citizens Advice.

For too long, upfront costs—often rip-off fees charged to tenants by unscrupulous letting agencies—have pushed people into unmanageable levels of debt, and sometimes into homelessness. The current system means that people, particularly those on low incomes, must pay as much as £3,000 to move, even if they will be paying a lower rent. Some have predicted that we will see a rise in rents as a result, but evidence from Scotland suggests that that is unlikely. If rents rise, the relatively small amount per month will be manageable in comparison to the extortionate amount that it costs to move.

For too long people living in the private rented sector have been treated as second-class citizens, and the Bill does some way towards putting that right. The Liberal Democrats welcome it, and welcome the Conservatives’ change of heart. We look forward to its introduction on 1 June, with only the small regret that it has taken so long for it to reach this stage. As I said earlier, I hope that we will continue to make changes in the law to make it easier for people to rent in a fair market where there is a good number of affordable and social homes.

Mrs Wheeler: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall be very short and very pithy.

I thank Members on both sides of the House for their passionate and constructive contributions to the Bill’s passage. I also thank the civil servants who have worked so hard to bring the Bill to this successful stage. We...
particularly wanted that to happen quickly so that the lady who is pregnant would not give birth in the Box. I have told her that if the baby is a boy, it must be called Bill!

I hope we can all agree that improvements have been made, thanks to the work of many Members on both sides of the House, and that as a result the Bill will be even more effective in delivering its promise to protect tenants from unfair charges. I hope that the assurances I have been able to give will mean that the Commons amendments will not be pressed to the vote.

**Lords amendment 1 agreed to.**

**Lords amendments 2 to 35 agreed to.**

**Schedule 1**

**PERMITTED PAYMENTS**

*Motion made, and Question put, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 36.—* (Mrs Wheeler.)

The House proceeded to a Division.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I remind the House that the motion is subject to double majority voting of the whole House and of Members representing constituencies in England.

The House having divided: Ayes 293, Noes 220.


**Division No. 304**

[2.37 pm]

**AYES**

| Adams, Nigel | Burns, Conor |
| Afolami, Bim | Burt, rh Alistair |
| Afriyie, Adam | Cairns, rh Alun |
| Aldous, Peter | Campbell, Mr Gregory |
| Allan, Lucy | Cartidge, James |
| Amess, Sir David | Cash, Sir William |
| Andrew, Stuart | Caulfield, Maria |
| Arag, Edward | Chalk, Alex |
| Atkins, Victoria | Chishti, Rehman |
| Bacon, Mr Richard | Churchill, Jo |
| Badenoch, Mrs Kemi | Clark, Colin |
| Baker, Mr Steve | Clarke, Mr Simon |
| Baldwin, Harriet | Cleverly, James |
| Barclay, rh Stephen | Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey |
| Baron, Mr John | Coffey, Dr Thérèse |
| Bebb, Guto | Collins, Damian |
| Bellingham, Sir Henry | Costa, Alberto |
| Benyon, rh Richard | Courts, Robert |
| Beresford, Sir Paul | Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey |
| Berry, Jake | Crabb, rh Stephen |
| Blackman, Bob | Crouch, Tracey |
| Blunt, Crispin | Davies, Chris |
| Boles, Nick | Davies, Glyn |
| Bottomley, Sir Peter | Davies, Mims |
| Bowie, Andrew | Djanogly, Mr Jonathan |
| Bradley, Ben | Docherty, Leo |
| Bradley, rh Karen | Dodds, rh Nigel |
| Brady, Sir Graham | Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M. |
| Braverman, Suella | Donelan, Michelle |
| Brereton, Jack | Dorries, Ms Nadine |
| Bridgen, Andrew | Double, Steve |
| Brine, Steve | Dowden, Oliver |
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| Buckland, Robert | Drax, Richard |
| Burghart, Alex | Duddridge, James |

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Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
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Evernett, rh Sir David
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Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
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Freer, Mike
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Ganier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Gibbon, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
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Greening, rh Justine
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Smith, rh Julian  
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Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burden, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Jenny  
Chapman, Dame Louise  
Ellman, Mr Dan  
Ellmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Field, rh Frank  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Pletcher, Colleen  
Flinn, rh Caroline  
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Foxcroft, Vicky  
Frith, James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gaffney, Hugh  
Gapes, Mike  
Gardiner, Barry  
George, Ruth  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsiff, Mr Roger  
Goodman, Helen  
Green, Kate  
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Greenwood, Margaret  
Griffith, Nia  
Grogan, John  
Haigh, Louise  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hanson, rh David  
Hardy, Emma  
Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
Haris, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayman, Sue  
Healey, rh John  
Hendrick, Sir Mark  
Heburn, Mr Stephen  
Hill, Mike  
Hillier, Meg  
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hoey, Kate  
Holliern, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Howarth, rh Mr George  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Jarvis, Dan  
Jones, Darren  
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Jones, Sarah  
Jones, Susan Elan  
Kane, Mike  
Keeley, Barbara  
Kendall, Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Kilien, Ged  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kyle, Peter  
Laird, Lesley  
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Lavery, Ian  
Lee, Karen  
Leslie, Mr Chris  
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Lloyd, Tony  
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Mann, John  
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Maskell, Rachael  
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McCabe, Steve  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McDonagh, Siobhain  
McDonnell, Andy  
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McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGinn, Conor  
McGovern, Alison  
McInnes, Liz  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorris, Anna  
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Moor, Mrs Madeleine  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morr, Grahame  
Nandy, Lisa  
Norris, Alex  
Onasanya, Fiona  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwrarah, Chi  
Osamor, Kate  
Peacock, Stephanie  
Pearce, Teresa  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Phillipson, Bridget  
Piddock, Laura  
Platt, Jo  
Pollard, Luke  
Pound, Stephen  
Powell, Lucy  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Rashid, Faisal  
Rayner, Angela  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Rees, Christina  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Rodd, Matt  
Ruane, Chris  
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
Ryan, rh Joan  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smee, Ruth  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Nick  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Spellar, rh John  
Stamper, rh Keir  
Stevens, Jo  

Tellers for the Ayes:  
Amanda Milling and  
Paul Maynard  

NOES  
Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Antoniassi, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
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Byrne, rh Liam  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Jenny  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Cooper, Julie  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Sir David  
Creagh, Mary  
Creasy, Stella  
Cruddas, Jon  
Cryer, John  
Cummins, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Daby, Janet  
David, Wayne  
Davies, Geraint  
De Cordova, Marsha  
De Piero, Gloria  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dodds, Annelsise  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Peter  
Drew, Dr David  
Dromey, Jack  
Eagle, Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Efford, Clive  
Elliot, Julie  
Ellmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
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Grogan, John  
Haigh, Louise  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hanson, rh David  
Hardy, Emma  
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Howarth, rh Mr George  
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Lee, Karen  
Leslie, Mr Chris  
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
Lewis, Clive  
Lloyd, Tony  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lucas, lan C.
Sir Christopher Chope: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I accept your ruling in relation to the prerogative of the Speaker to decide which amendments are selected and which are not, but what I was really concerned about was the fact that the Member who tabled the amendment was not notified as to whether it had been selected. Is there now a new convention in this place that a Member does not know whether their amendment has been selected until the debate starts? If that is a new convention, let us all be clear about it, but my understanding, after more than 30 years in this place, is that if a Member moves an amendment, they normally get advance notice of whether it has been selected.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly reasonable point about his experience over the past 30 years, but we live in ever-changing times, and I genuinely do not know the answer to his question.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. First, if the Government Whip had not said, “Not moved,” we would now be in the debate on the motion. If we had had that debate, I would have spoken against the amendment of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), so at what point would those who had put down amendments known that they would be put to a vote? Secondly—maybe the Leader of the House can assist with this—have you had any indication that the Government intend to move the order relating to private Members’ Bills days at some point in the future? If so, when might that be?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, the right hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly reasonable point. I should point out to him and to the House that Mr Speaker’s selection of amendments is published as a provisional selection of amendments. It is then up to Mr Speaker which amendments he finally selects. That would be the normal course of action. I am unaware of a provisional selection of amendments having been published in relation to motion 4 today.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As you can well imagine, there may be a lot of interest in this House about the selection of amendments over the next few weeks, so this is not merely some esoteric question. Now, I have been here for only 18 years—I am a relative newbie—but the Speaker’s conference would be put to a vote? Secondly—maybe the Leader of the House can assist with this—have you had any indication that the Government intend to move the order relating to private Members’ Bills days at some point in the future? If so, when might that be?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly reasonable point. I should point out to him and to the House that Mr Speaker’s selection of amendments is published as a provisional selection of amendments. It is then up to Mr Speaker which amendments he finally selects. That would be the normal course of action. I am unaware of a provisional selection of amendments having been published in relation to motion 4 today.
Madam Deputy Speaker: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s point, and I can give him a very direct answer. I will not disclose to the Chamber or in any other way what happens at the Speaker’s conference in the morning. It is a private meeting between Mr Speaker and his Deputies and senior Clerks, and I will not and cannot answer questions about it.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As someone who has been here for 27 years, my service is obviously larger than that of the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois). Can the—[Interruption.]—Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is making an important point. Just be quiet.

Ms Eagle: While we are living in an era of some creativity with respect to the House’s Standing Orders, can you confirm that we have not been so creative so far that amendments cannot survive the withdrawal of the main motion being withdrawn?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am delighted to answer the hon. Lady’s perspicacious point of order. She is absolutely correct that amendments cannot survive the withdrawal of the main motion. I will say it again that the selection of amendments is entirely a matter for Mr Speaker, and I am sure that if Mr Speaker had been here, as he will be at some future point, he would have been delighted to answer these questions.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you confirm that it would be in order for the Government to propose a future motion—hopefully very quickly—that would allow the Service Animals (Offences) Bill finally to make progress and get its Third Reading? The Bill has support on both sides of the House and had cross-party support in Committee last week.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am happy to confirm to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that that would be perfectly in order. He also reminds me that I did not intend to bring forward motion 4 again at a future time.

Can you confirm that it would be in order for the hon. Lady to make an important point. Just be quiet.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am happy to confirm to the hon. Lady that I am aware at this point of any such intention, but one would hope so.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ATOMIC ENERGY AND RADIOACTIVE SUBSTANCES)

That the draft Transfrontier Shipment of Radioactive Waste and Spent Fuel (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 28 November 2018, be approved. —(Jeremy Quin.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Amanda Milling and Paul Maynard

**NOES**
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffrey, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Howarth, rh Mr George
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Over the Counter Derivatives, Central Counterparties and Trade Repositories (Amendment, etc., and Transitional Provision) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 5 December 2018, be approved.—(Jeremy Quin.)

Question agreed to.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CIVIL PARTNERSHIP)

That the draft Equality (Amendment and Revocation) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.—(Jeremy Quin.)

Question agreed to.
Fire Safety and Cladding

*Motion made, and Question proposed.* That this House do now adjourn.—(Jeremy Quin.)

3.23 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of fire safety, which is of great concern to many people in my constituency and throughout the country, particularly since the Grenfell Tower fire 19 months ago. The debate is happening somewhat earlier than we envisaged. I hope that means that there will be more opportunities for other Members to participate, because I know that the issue affects many constituencies.

I want to cover two areas: first, the major fire that happened at the Shurgard self-storage centre in my constituency on new year’s eve; and secondly, fire safety and the use of flammable cladding in residential and other buildings throughout the country, about which there has been great disquiet since the Grenfell Tower fire.

The fire at the Shurgard self-storage centre was massive. More than 1,200 people had stored their goods and possessions in that facility, which was one of the largest in London. When I was first alerted to what had happened, my first thought was, “I hope everybody is safe,” and it was reassuring to hear that there had been no loss of life. However, a couple of weeks later I had the opportunity to meet a group of Shurgard customers who had lost everything they had put in storage at that facility. The scale of loss, devastation and harm that that caused cannot be overstated. The losses were enormous.

As with all self-storage centres, the Shurgard facility was marketed as a safe place to store goods. It was even advertised as a place for those who had suffered a bereavement to store the belongings of a loved one.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to the House. Constituents of mine had their goods burnt in the Shurgard fire. I am sure that hon. Members will be interested to know that, having advertised as “safe and secure”, since the fire the Shurgard website has removed 35 mentions of that phrase. Its use is nothing short of mis-selling.

Mr Reed: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for her intervention. It is telling that Shurgard saw fit to remove all the language about safety from its website after the fire. I hope that, during the debate, we will expose the fact that the facility was far from being as safe as it was marketed to its customers.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue in the Chamber. Like the constituents of my other neighbour, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), many of my constituents had possessions at the facility. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is essential that the London fire brigade carries out a full investigation to establish whether the operators of Shurgard had implemented all the relevant fire safety measures? It seems that the fire spread so quickly and so extensively that it requires a thorough investigation.

Mr Reed: I completely agree and am grateful for that intervention. Everybody who uses self-storage facilities needs to know that their possessions are safe when they put them in storage. We need to know that Shurgard and other providers of such services abide by the regulations, and that the regulations are sufficiently robust to provide the reassurances that customers deserve and need.

When I spoke to the group of customers, I found that the single biggest reason for storing possessions at the facility was being between homes. People were not just putting some spare goods into self-storage; they had left the place where they were living and had not yet moved into their new home, so everything they owned was stored at the facility. As a result, everything was lost; everything was destroyed in the fire. As one of them said to me, “It’s bad enough to lose a sofa, a bed or a sideboard, but at least you can replace those things. What about your keepsakes from loved ones who have passed away?” The company advertised its facility as a safe space to leave keepsakes for those who had suffered a bereavement. What about someone who has lost a lifetime of family photographs—all their memories of their family experiences and of the people they most love? A price cannot be put on that. It cannot be insured. If it is gone in a fire, it is gone forever and it is irreplaceable. The devastation, pain and stress of losing such things can be incalculable.

I met one family—a husband, his wife and their three children—who, because of benefit-system failings, had been evicted from the home that they rented just before Christmas. They had put everything they had into this Shurgard self-storage facility. They were penniless because of the problems with universal credit so they could not afford insurance. They have now lost absolutely everything that they owned. They have been left absolutely devastated, without any possessions at all, and they are living in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. That family need help, and they need it urgently, because they are facing critical hardship as a result of what happened.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. He has picked up on a crucial point—that the storage centre claimed that it was safe, and so on. Does he agree that when the Minister responds he should refer to the specific case of those individuals, who have lost everything because of the social system and are now living in a bed and breakfast? These must be considered special cases, in which the Government need to step in and act.

Mr Reed: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention and completely agree with her. I hope that when the time comes the Minister is able to respond to that point. People who have been left in severe hardship as a result of what happened have had nowhere to go for the help that they deserve.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue to the House. It is important that evaluations are made of properties where the same thing might occur. Does he agree that there has been ample time to assess the number of buildings that are in danger? My local authority in Northern Ireland, Ards and North Down Borough Council, carried out evaluations and provided reports within six weeks of the disaster. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that additional funding must be put in place to help local councils to make evaluations and to help those people who need compensation, and that that needs to be done as a matter of urgency? Furthermore, on the changes to
[Jim Shannon]

fire safety regulations, does he agree that the real, live testing of materials in the construction sector is urgently required?

Mr Reed: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, with which I have great sympathy. I believe that in this particular case the investigation is also in the hands of the police, because we do not yet know whether arson lay behind the tragedy at the Shurgard facility on Purley Way in Croydon.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a strong point that—I am sure he will come on to this—applies as much to residential fires as to the case he is talking about. First, there is the issue of insurance, with people in these situations often underinsured or not insured. There is also the issue of who is liable. As he says, the case he is describing may be a criminal matter. At Shepherd's Court in my constituency, there was an obvious cause—it was a tumble-drier fire—but the manufacturer denies liability and will not pay out.

As a consequence of cases like that, people can lose everything and go for years and years without being able to replace their belongings.

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am also interested in the insurance aspects of this case, including whether people were wrongly advised by the self-storage company about the level of insurance that they should have taken out and, indeed, whether there was mis-selling of insurance. I have contacted the relevant authorities—the Financial Conduct Authority and others—to seek their advice. I hope we can bring that issue back to the Chamber at the appropriate time, and I would be delighted to work with my hon. Friend on that, since he has an interest in it.

I return to my attempt to establish the extent of the harm that has been caused to people’s lives by the fire. I met another woman—a customer—who had stored in the facility her mother’s and her grandmother’s ashes. One simply cannot imagine what it would feel like for an individual to lose something of such enormous human value to them.

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is giving way generously. On that terrible point, last weekend I met some people who were affected, and I have a constituent whose pictures of her deceased children were burned. These things are so irreplaceable and so sad. People really did believe that their things would be kept safe, and that everything would be okay. We cannot emphasise enough what a horror they have been going through.

Mr Reed: I am grateful again to my hon. Friend for her intervention. One really cannot exaggerate the pain that has been caused. When anybody puts their most beloved and treasured possessions in a facility and are assured that it is safe, they deserve to know that it actually is safe. I met an artist who had lost a lifetime’s artworks, which she had created. I met a DJ who collects first-edition reggae albums on vinyl. All of that is gone in the fire, all of it irreplaceable. No money can replace that.

Of course, many businesses today keep their stock in facilities like these, and many businesspeople have lost their stock. Even if it was properly insured, the short-term loss of that stock means that they have lost a whole quarter’s trading, which is enough to put many small businesses under. I really do think that the Minister needs to consider what emergency support is available for the people facing real hardship and crisis as a result of the fire.

Many colleagues have raised concerns about the level of fire safety at the Shurgard facility, and I share those concerns. When I met a group of customers, that was one of the biggest areas giving them cause for concern that they raised with me. A customer putting their possessions in a self-storage facility would assume that there had been some effort, when designing it, to prevent the spread of fire, should a fire take hold. In fact, the walls in the individual units in this facility did not go right up to the ceiling—there was a gap between the top of the unit and the ceiling—so a fire that started in one unit could quickly and easily move into the next, and then the next and beyond. It seems to me shocking that these facilities are built without designing in measures to prevent the rapid spread of fire.

Customers using that facility reasonably assumed that a sprinkler system was installed in case of fire. In fact, there is no sprinkler system in that facility, and there is no requirement for self-storage units to have sprinkler systems. Another point is that Shurgard did not ask their customers to report or keep a record of what they were storing in that self-storage facility. Someone could put all their most treasured possessions in the unit they were renting, but the next-door unit could be filled up with barrels of oil or something equally flammable, and nobody would ever know.

If we put all that together, there were in effect no fire safety measures whatsoever in this facility. It was advertising a service as safe and secure for people to keep their goods in, but it simply was not. It was taking money from people, and then not providing the service that people expected. If things go wrong—and on new year’s eve in Croydon they went severely wrong—everything people owned would have gone: it would have been taken away, and they would have lost it.

Shurgard has been very clear with me—I have met it to discuss this—that it has complied with all UK fire safety regulations. I do not know whether that is true, but that is the point it has made to me. If what it says is true and it was fully compliant, those regulations need to be reviewed and tightened as a matter of urgency.

Sarah Jones: At the meeting with customers last weekend, they made two really interesting points. One was that Shurgard in other European countries would have to have sprinklers, because in other European countries there are regulations requiring a building of a certain size to have sprinklers, so the same company would have sprinklers in another country but not here. They also made the point—I do not know whether this is 100% accurate—that, about 40% of Europe’s storage is in this country. There is something about the nature of the cost of housing and the fact that people have to put so much stuff into storage, perhaps because of the value of land, that means our country has a particular problem in this area and needs to look at the regulations for the storage sector in particular.
Mr Reed: I am sure that many people who keep their possessions in such self-storage centres will be astonished to learn that the multinational companies, where they are multinational, operate safer and more secure facilities abroad than they operate in the United Kingdom. That seems to me entirely wrong. I hope the Minister, when he responds, will explain to the House what he intends to do about conducting a review of the levels of fire safety in these facilities, and whether he believes there is a case for tightening those regulations.

Many, many people use these facilities. They are very common all over London, and we all know about them and have them in our constituencies. The customers include people who are between homes—moving from one place to another—either as buyers or as renters. Many newly built flats are very small and are built without adequate storage, so people use self-storage centres instead. If people have suffered a bereavement and have lost a relative, they need somewhere to store their possessions; we do not all have the space in our home to store these things. All those people need to know that their possessions are safe, and if the regulations are not allowing that to happen right now, the regulations need to change.

My concern is that the fact that the regulations are inadequate has created a race to the bottom in fire safety standards, as self-storage companies compete with one another on price. The way in which they reduce price is to reduce staffing in the facility and reduce the level of security and fire safety measures. They do so to minimise their costs, so that they may offer as low a price as possible. The only thing that will maintain minimum standards—and people need to know what they are—is to ensure that there are adequate fire safety regulations for self-storage facilities. I am afraid that we do not have those at the moment.

Finally on this particular issue, does the Minister see the case, or the need for, providing specific help to people facing severe financial hardship—whether it be from the relevant public authorities, the Government, or even perhaps the company itself, which must bear some responsibility towards their customers for what has happened to them?

I will turn now, if I may, from the subject of self-storage towards wider issues of fire safety in residential blocks. The issue of cladding in particular has become very significant and of great concern throughout the House ever since the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower 19 months ago.

In today’s Prime Minister’s questions, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) reminded us that, days after Grenfell went up, the Prime Minister promised to do everything in her power to keep people safe. Since that time—19 months have passed—the Government seem to have done precious little in concrete terms to reassure people that they are safer now than they were then.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank my hon. Friend, who is being generous with his time, for giving way once again. He rightly points out that, 19 months on, we still have many blocks covered in this cladding. Residents in my own constituency are living in an unsafe block, and they might have to pay tens of thousands of pounds for fire safety remedial work. Does he agree that it should not be the leaseholders who foot the bill, and that the Government need to intervene to ensure that freeholders or the Government themselves can implement it? They must take the pressure and the burden off leaseholders.

Mr Reed: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. I completely agree: the leaseholders seem to be the innocent party in all this. They certainly should not be forced to bear the cost, the stress or the worry of having flammable cladding on the place in which they live.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is very clear—the Government have made this clear—that leaseholders should not be left footing the bill. When the developer is also the freeholder, as was the case in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, and is prepared, because of the potential reputational damage, to step up to the mark, the problem is resolved. However, as he will know from experience, a difficulty arises when the freehold is sold on, often to a trust company or a financial institution. Unlike a firm of developers, such a body will not be trying to sell houses to the public and is not subject to any reputational pressures, and will use very common clauses in their leases to pass back to their leaseholders any cost that say, the local authority or Government push on to them. Do we not need a legal mechanism to override that, which is difficult to do with leases, or, in such cases, to compensate leaseholders directly so that they do not lose out? It has to be one or the other.

Mr Reed: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I know that he is fighting very hard on behalf of his residents who are living in these circumstances, and he makes a point with which I agree. That is at the heart of our problem with the Government’s response. The Government can say what they like in support of leaseholders, but if they do not act, they are not actually helping them and, unfortunately, a moral obligation is not enforceable in court. We need a legal means of redress for people who have been damaged.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful and moving speech. I am sure that his constituents are incredibly grateful to him for his tireless campaigning to support them. We are talking about residents, but I wish to draw the House’s attention to a different issue—schools. Hundreds of schools across the country are also covered in combustible material, and the Government have not included them in the building safety programme. [Interruption.] Well, that is the latest report. The Minister suggests that there are not hundreds, so I would be very happy to send him the report that I have read that gives that evidence. When he responds to the debate, will he also talk about how he can ensure that our children are safe when they attend school?

Mr Reed: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. I, too, look forward to hearing a response from the Minister. I have tried to find out whether a newly rebuilt school in my own constituency has flammable cladding, but it seems impossible to do so. If I, as the local Member of Parliament with the access that I have to the relevant authorities, cannot find out, I pity those poor parents who are trying to find out whether their children will be safe after they have taken them to
school each morning. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response on that point.

I came to this subject because a block in my constituency, Citiscape, has the same sort of cladding—aluminium composite material cladding—that was on Grenfell Tower. The cost of removing and replacing the cladding was £2 million. The managing agents wrote to leaseholders in the block, who received estimates of up to £30,000 each for the work to be carried out. Of course the vast majority could not afford that—not many people have £30,000 lying around in the bank, particularly not those who have just bought their first flat and are stretched on their mortgage—but they were told that unless everybody paid up, the work would not happen. In effect, nothing would be done to keep the people in the block safe. We approached the freeholder, but the freeholder is not legally liable to carry out the work and there was no way to compel the freeholder to do it. The builders also are not legally liable to carry out the work. They can rely on the fact that there are concerns about lack of clarity in the building regulations and guidance, and they had been following the guidance that they believed meant that the cladding was safe. It turned out at Grenfell that ACM cladding is absolutely not safe.

When the case came to the housing tribunal, it ruled that the leaseholders were liable. We hear welcome words from Ministers at the Dispatch Box saying that leaseholders should not be made to pay, but in fact the housing tribunal—the legal body responsible for adjudicating on the matter—said the leaseholders were indeed responsible and would have to pay. In the case of Citiscape and others where not all the leaseholders can pay, the work will not be done. People are stuck living in blocks with Grenfell-style flammable cladding strapped on the outside; they are living with their families, their children and their parents in absolute terror.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his speech and the argument he is making. It has long been argued that there should be some reform of leasehold law. We have tinkered with it over the years, but it needs to be dealt with properly, and Governments have shied away from doing so. I thought that the Secretary of State had said that he would discuss leaseholds with the people involved, some of the companies and so on. About 12 months ago, I said to the previous Secretary of State that what the Government should have done after Grenfell was to take emergency powers. Had they done so, we would not have some of these problems now. They did not do it and the rest is history.

Mr Reed: I am grateful for that helpful intervention and look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

I said that there were concerns about the state of the building regulations and the guidance, and it is worth exploring briefly how we got into a position where the regulations were so lax or could be interpreted in such a way. Back in 2009, there was a fire in Lakanal House in Camberwell, central London, that resulted in the death of six people, including a baby. An inquest concluded there should be some reform of leasehold law. W e need properly to understand how this came to be, why the Government did not act, and why the Government still have not acted to ban that type of cladding from buildings. They are talking about banning it, but all flammable cladding has not been banned from all buildings—[Interruption.] The Minister will have an opportunity to respond later in the debate, and we look forward to hearing him. [Interruption.] If he wants to intervene, I will take his intervention.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I am quite happy to intervene, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. It should be clear that in December last year, we banned flammable cladding of all types on buildings over 18 metres. This is an absolute and complete ban, and nobody should be under any illusion about that, or represent it as being anything other than that.

Mr Reed: As I will come on to say during what remains of this debate, a partial ban is not a ban. This kind of cladding is still permitted on far too many buildings, and too many people are not safe. There has been no action to take flammable cladding off buildings where it already exists. Those are the issues that I want to come on to. In fact—

Kit Malthouse rose—
Mr Reed: I will take an intervention in a moment, but I want to make this point, because it is linked to the issue that we are debating right now.

In fact, there are still thousands of terrified residents living in blocks with the same kind of cladding, or a very similar kind of cladding, as that which went up in flames at Grenfell Tower. There are still 56 private blocks of flats around the country—that is 56—that have no clear plan in place to remove and replace it. People are left living in fear. There is no point in the Minister standing up and telling me the Government banned it last December when right now, in 56 blocks around the country, people are living with flammable cladding strapped to the outside of their homes and no plan whatsoever to remove it.

Kit Malthouse: We went through this yesterday during the urgent question. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is seeking to make an issue of it. We have made it very clear that while he is correct that there are still a number of private sector residential buildings that do not have a clear plan for remediation, it is the case, as I said yesterday, that 100% of those buildings have temporary measures in place that have been agreed and certified by the local fire and rescue service as appropriate for the building. My primary concern, and the Department’s primary concern, has been to make sure that people are safe tonight. As I am sure he would acknowledge, it is not possible, by some feat of magic, to make this cladding disappear overnight. We must, however, make sure that everybody is safe overnight. That is where we have been focused.

The hon. Gentleman says that thousands of people are living in terror in blocks, but that should not be the case, on the basis that every local fire and rescue service has visited, inspected and agreed temporary measures with every residential building over 18 metres in height that has this cladding, and they are going back to check and monitor to make sure that they are in place. I really would urge him not to cause undue alarm among this residential population, because steps have been taken to keep them safe.

Mr Reed: I have to say, with all due respect to the Minister, that I find that comment rather complacent. It is all well and good to say that this cladding cannot be taken down overnight, but it is 19 months since Grenfell Tower went up in flames, it is 10 years since Lakanal House went up in flames, and it is eight years since the coroner told the Government that there needed to be a ban on this kind of cladding—that is not overnight. The Government have not acted with anything like the ban on this kind of cladding—that is not overnight. To keep them safe. They do not feel that they have been kept safe. Whatever the Minister tells us, if we speak to people living in these blocks, they say that they feel abandoned by a Government who told them in the aftermath of Grenfell that everything would be done to keep them safe. They do not feel that they have been kept safe, and they manifestly have not been.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; he makes an important point well. The other course of action that would normally be open to a homeowner—selling their home—is not open, because their homes are unsellable. Nobody will buy a flat in a block that has flammable cladding strapped to the outside of it. Whatever the Minister tells us, if we speak to people living in these blocks, they say that they feel abandoned by a Government who told them in the aftermath of Grenfell that everything would be done to keep them safe. They do not feel that they have been kept safe, and they manifestly have not been.

Sarah Jones: I am sorry to keep intervening—my hon. Friend is being incredibly generous—but I just want to make a point about waking watch. Having talked to the fire services, I know that it is not an ideal situation. The fire services are worried that companies have come out of the woodwork and started doing waking watch, but people are not always well-trained and there are not always enough of them on site. Waking watch is very much a temporary measure. To have 19 months of waking watch is expensive, but also not ideal, and we cannot be 100% sure that these people are trained and doing what they are supposed to be doing.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again and for mentioning the problem at Northpoint. There is a certain insecurity about the risk of human error at the very least with a waking watch, but the difficulty is compounded by the cash flow impact. Most of these leaseholder groups will have a sinking fund that has been set up over the years, but that is quickly dissipated by the cost of the waking watch. In the case of my constituents, there is an enforcement notice running out in April. They could have the waking watch until then, which will exhaust all the reserves and will mean further calls on funds from people who often have mortgages, because they are often first-time buyers, and who effectively cannot raise any more money because the flats are currently valueless. It is a Catch-22: the money is exhausted, and they have no means of raising any more.

Mr Reed: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; he makes an important point well. The other course of action that would normally be open to a homeowner—selling their home—is not open, because their homes are unsellable. Nobody will buy a flat in a block that has flammable cladding strapped to the outside of it. Whatever the Minister tells us, if we speak to people living in these blocks, they say that they feel abandoned by a Government who told them in the aftermath of Grenfell that everything would be done to keep them safe. They do not feel that they have been kept safe, and they manifestly have not been.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; he is being very generous and making an excellent speech. Does he agree that part of the problem is the lack of trust? When I met residents in my local tower blocks, they said, “You’re telling me that this cladding on my block of flats is okay, but how can I trust?” That is compounded by the fact that the Lakanal House fire report, published in 2013, was not fully acted on by the previous Government but one.
Mr Reed: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention, and she is absolutely right. I have seen previous Secretaries of State stand at the Dispatch Box and say that those responsible need to take responsibility. It is the Government who are responsible because the Government failed to act on the instructions and advice of the coroner following the tragic and fatal Lakanal House fire in 2009. The Government are responsible for the situation that these people find themselves in, and the Government should take responsibility for giving those people a way out of this, without burdening them with unmanageable debt or pointing the finger at all sorts of other people who they say have a moral obligation to act, when that is unenforceable in any court.

The only way this can be dealt with is if the Government take direct action. As my hon. Friend said, the Government failed to clarify the regulations and guidance after the fire at Lakanal House. It is not about an individual Minister or Secretary of State—there has been a whole string of them ever since that time: Eric Pickles initially, but subsequently Greg Clark, Sajid Javid, Dominic Raab—[Interruption.] I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I cannot remember their constituencies. A string of Secretaries of State have failed to take appropriate action in line with the guidance that they were given. A previous Housing Minister, who is now the Prime Minister’s chief of staff, failed to act in this circumstance. I am afraid that collectively the Government are culpable for what has happened, and failed to act when they were told that action was necessary to prevent a repeat of Lakanal House. Of course, it was repeated horrifically in the disaster at Grenfell Tower.

I thought long and hard about why the Government would not act on that advice, and I have come to the conclusion that what is going on in this sector is nothing short of a national scandal. There is a tangled web of conflicts of interest that have led to the framework for fire safety regulations being wholly inadequate. The Building Research Establishment is a privatised organisation that helps to write fire safety regulations and drafts fire safety guidance. Its chief executive sits on the Government’s expert panel on fire safety, and one of its trustees, Sir Ken Knight, was until recently the Government’s chief fire safety adviser.

The BRE has a direct financial interest in the sector. It makes money by allowing cladding manufacturers to run fire safety tests on rigs that it sets up. The manufacturers are allowed to rerun those tests multiple times, with various adjustments, until they get the result that they want. There is no requirement on them ever to disclose the outcome of the final successful fire safety test—it is considered commercially confidential—nor is there any requirement on them to report publicly how many times their product failed a fire safety test before finally passing it.

The BRE makes money every single time a different rig is put up and a product is tested for combustibility. It has a direct financial interest in permitting the use of combustible cladding. It is an absolutely shocking and scandalous network of conflicts of interest that the Government should never have allowed to happen.

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is getting to the fundamentals of the issues. Let me give an example. I met a bunch of laggards, who handed me a document about the combustible compounds contained in phenolic foam insulation, which is used in multiple buildings. That document was 15 years old, and it detailed the combustible properties of that foam, which is still used and passes Government tests. The whole industry has to put up its hands on its historic culpability and the way it has dodged the inspection regime. These are life and death issues for our constituents.

Mr Reed: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the important point that he has made. He has emphasised that this is not just about ACM cladding—there is a problem with wider fire safety regulations in the entire building sector—which we cannot allow, not just on residential blocks but on many different kinds of buildings. We need to understand properly those conflicts of financial interest if we are to understand what led Ministers to reject advice that they should have followed all that time ago.

I hope the Minister will put me right on this point, but I fear that subsequent Secretaries of State and Housing Ministers did not correct the mistakes made in the decision to ignore the Lakanal House findings because, if they recognised it as political failure, they would have to take political responsibility for the 72 deaths at Grenfell Tower after it went up, which they did not want to do. That is an extraordinary thing to have to say, but I believe it is true because I can think of no other reason why Minister after Minister failed to correct regulations and guidance that were so manifestly unacceptable, and that posed such a threat to life. That is not just supposition—we saw that it was a threat to life in the scale of the tragedy and the deaths that happened at Grenfell Tower. I would go so far as to say that, if the Government were a private company and acted as they have, Ministers could be in the dock for corporate manslaughter.

Thangam Debbonaire: My hon. Friend makes incredibly powerful points that must be taken seriously. Does he agree that the Government need to trace it back to the source and say which local government Ministers did or did not take seriously the Lakanal House report recommendations?

Mr Reed: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is critical that that happens so that we can understand what went wrong in the process. If we do not understand it, we cannot stop it from ever happening again.

The Minister mentioned the partial ban on flammable cladding that the Government have announced, which is welcome. Industry bodies have said on the record that they welcome it, but have also said that it is not enough and that we need to go further. The Government have proposed a ban on ACM cladding on new buildings that are over 18 metres high—that is roughly six storeys—but have excluded hotels and office blocks. I simply do not understand why. What evidence is there that a hotel or an office block is any safer than a block of flats? Surely if someone is in a hotel where they have never stayed, they are less likely to know the fire safety escape routes than if they are living in a block of flats, where they may have lived for some considerable time.
Many people at work have disabilities and are immobile. Why do we assume that somebody on the 18th floor of a tall office block will be able to get out, but that somebody living on the 18th floor of a residential block needs protection from flammable cladding? It makes absolutely no sense to me whatsoever, and I would like the Minister to explain to the House today what evidence there is that hotels and office blocks of more than six storeys or 18 metres are any safer than blocks of flats of the same height.

As my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) said, after the new partial ban, the Government will still permit the use of flammable cladding on schools, care homes and hospitals under six storeys high, which of course most of them are. I wonder whether the Minister would feel comfortable telling a group of parents that he is most of them are. I wonder whether the Minister would feel comfortable telling a group of parents that he is allowing flammable cladding to go up on the building where they take their children every morning for an education. I certainly would not.

Emma Hardy: One justification for not having sprinklers in schools is that it is easy to evacuate a building. Having been a teacher for 11 years, I know that it would need only a couple of young children to go a-wander, as they can sometimes do, to create a risky situation. If I can dare to use this opportunity to put another point to the Minister, I would ask him not only to look at banning combustible materials, but to look again at putting sprinklers into schools.

Mr Reed: I look forward to the Minister’s response, but I agree completely agree with my hon. Friend. I will draw to a close soon and I look forward to the Minister’s response to hon. Members, but we need to recognise the scale of Government failure to put things right in any acceptable way, given that it has been 10 years since Lakanal House and 19 months since Grenfell Tower. The best way to meet the Lakanal House coroner’s demand for clarity is to implement a complete ban on the use of flammable cladding on all buildings where people live or work. It is crystal clear; it is understandable to the building industry and everybody else; and it could be implemented if the Government had the will. In addition, we cannot look only at new buildings. We need to look at all buildings where flammable cladding exists and continues to pose an unacceptable danger to people’s safety and even to their lives. We need an action plan from the Government, for which they take responsibility, to strip flammable cladding from every single building where it exists. Many European countries have such a ban. Scotland is introducing a ban. We need that ban here, too.

There is one fire a month on average in buildings with flammable cladding. It is only a matter of time before one of those fires is not put out. The Government simply cannot risk the horror of another Grenfell. This is a time for action, not for words.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the next speaker, I must inform the House of an error in calculating the number of votes of Members for English constituencies in the Division on Lords amendment 36. The figures for the England-only vote should not have been announced as Ayes 265 and Noes 193; they should have been announced as Ayes 261 and Noes 194. The result is unaffected.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am grateful for the time that has become available to make some brief remarks, although my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) set the case out fully and persuasively, covering many of the points. We all wait keenly to hear what the Minister has to say in his response. Notwithstanding his comment that we went through all this yesterday, rather than being bored by the subject or not interested in responding, he should seize the opportunity to give a fuller account of where the Government stand. As my hon. Friend set out, the Government’s inactivity and partial solutions mean that we are in a state of some confusion—certainly our constituents are—and severely worried about the risks that remain. That is not scaremongering; those are real concerns felt by our constituents.

In a block in my constituency—I am going to a residents’ meeting tomorrow night, the fourth on the removal of flammable cladding that I will have attended—the residents are fortunate in the sense that they have a housing association as a landlord, it has accepted liability and is removing the cladding at its own expense, and it is prepared to put up non-flammable cladding instead. The situation is still incredibly worrying; fire marshals have been in for periods, and there are concerns about the structure and other potential damage to the building, causing a huge amount of anxiety and of time taken up in negotiation.

I feel very much for my constituents and those of other Members who do not have similar advantages, but that introductory point allows me to say that the problem is widespread and hugely complicated. The Government seem to rely, as if on a crutch, on the Dame Judith Hackitt report. It is a good report, but it approaches the matter in a certain way—she would like to see a “golden thread of information” through UK projects from “design and construction” to “operation”—and at the moment we do not have a clear picture of which buildings are at risk.

Dame Judith can set out a preferred method of operation, but that does not resolve any of the many problems, or the conflicts of interest over time, set out by my hon. Friend, and nor does the report actually implement anything. Those are both matters for Government, and in those respects they are singularly failing. In clarification from the Minister, I want to hear in respect of existing buildings with all types of flammable cladding what the Government’s policy is likely to be. My understanding, from responses to questions I asked before Christmas, is that the policy is likely to cover residential buildings, buildings over 18 metres and buildings with aluminium composite material cladding systems. That excludes a very large number of buildings that we know could have flammable cladding. I cannot understand the logic of the policy not being comprehensive, other than that the Government might not want to put in the resources or are phasing it in over a very long time.

Kit Malthouse: In all the assessments we make or have made around the ban on combustible cladding, we are guided by the expert panel. It is effectively the expert advisory panel that is setting the 18-metre limit, deciding which buildings are within scope and where there is most risk to life. This decision has not been made by politicians in the absence of expert advice. As I said
yesterday, I cannot pretend to be a fire safety expert. Both I and the Secretary of State take into account the advice of a group of people that includes Dame Judith Hackitt, and it advises us regularly on these measures.

Andy Slaughter: With respect to the Minister, he may be listening to what he wants to hear. He should listen to a wider range of voices. I will give an example. In yesterday’s urgent question, several Members—I was not one of them—mentioned the Rockwool company. I have quite a knowledge of this, because I have three very tall buildings—over 23 storeys—in my constituency that are just a few hundred metres from Grenfell Tower and which were fully clad by Rockwool. Following testing, the local authority was able to assure tenants that it was non-flammable cladding and that it met some of the highest standards.

The Minister, with almost wilful misunderstanding, said yesterday that he was not there to listen to people promoting individual companies. That is not the point. No one is promoting the commercial interests of Rockwool—in my dealings with it, it has been perfectly clear about that. We are pointing out that its standards are higher than many others in terms of the combustibility of the cladding, the insulation and the combination of materials. That is the point. No Member on either side of the Chamber is standing up and saying, “Please buy this particular product”: we are asking the Government to listen to the voices saying that their limitations and expectations do not go far enough.

Kit Malthouse: I want to reiterate what I said yesterday. I agreed with whoever it was who questioned me that it was not appropriate for us to promote a particular product from a particular company. As the hon. Gentleman says, the job of the Government is to set the standards, through building regulations, to which products must adhere and to make sure that the regulatory inspection regime works so that people can have confidence that the right product is being used in the right place. To reach those assessments, the Government require the advice of non-commercially interested expert opinion. The British people would not think it unreasonable for us to assemble a group of fire safety experts to advise on those standards and the circumstances in which they should pertain. That is all I am saying. As far as I can see, the Government are acting perfectly reasonably in taking this kind of advice. He may well dispute that advice, and he might think he can go further, but he needs to find evidence of where his expertise is coming from, and if it can be demonstrated that the independent expert advisory panel—the great and the good of fire safety—is incorrect, of course we will listen.

Andy Slaughter: I find the Minister’s attitude astonishingly complacent. I am a member of the all-party group on fire safety rescue, which has done a lot of work on this, but it cannot possibly compete with the resources of the Government, so let us not be ridiculous about who should do the groundwork. I have taken part in a number of seminars with a number of experts. On those occasions I have heard a variety of views, but even now I still hear, from experts, manufacturers and others, special pleading for the acceptability of either leaving combustible materials—some of them more combustible than the materials used on Grenfell Tower—on blocks, or continuing to install them. That terrifies me, and I think that it ought to worry the Minister.

Jon Cruddas: When it comes to the question of complacency and how much confidence we have in the system, I should repeat what I said earlier today about the laggers who put in the insulation, and who are aware of health and safety reports that undermine confidence in the materials that the Government are standing by on behalf of their regulatory bodies. Something must be systemically wrong if the guys who put the stuff on these buildings—and they are guys—are aware of that, and have commissioned reports because they are being damaged by those materials. If they are aware of it, it should not be beyond our collective wit for the Government to be aware of it.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend has made a telling point. We will not find things that are wrong unless we go and look for them, and I do not feel that the Government are going to go and look for them.

Mr Reed: I completely agree with my hon. Friend’s point about the cladding manufacturers seeking better reassurance for themselves. Of course, it is not just the cladding that is flammable; it is the combination of the cladding with the insulation. Because the Government permit what are called desktop studies—

Kit Malthouse rose—

Mr Reed:—which have allowed a particular cladding to be enriched with a particular form of insulation, they do not always know what is being put together and how dangerous that will be, and the cladding manufacturers do not want to know that their products are being used in ways that threaten life.

Andy Slaughter: I think that the Minister was trying to intervene on an intervention. I am glad to see that he at least has some interest in the subject. I shall make a little progress, and then I will take an intervention from him.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I do not think we are being paranoid about this. What concerns us is that a whole industry has developed on a defective basis over time, and has not been corrected: it continues to function as an industry and to make profits. No one is saying that we are going to wipe the slate clean overnight, but a lot of people have a lot to hide, and I therefore think it particularly important for the Government—who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) said, may have something to hide as well—to be rigorous in shaking this out. They should look at the history—at the defects and malpractices that have grown up over the last 10 years or more—but they should also be very sceptical in future about some of the advice that they are getting. They should obtain the broadest possible range of advice.

Kit Malthouse: Let me again correct the record. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was absent in December, but he should know that we have banned desktop studies, and restricted them in other circumstances, to try to discourage their use. We did that before Christmas.

The hon. Gentleman made a good point about the effect of insulation combined with cladding. Our ban on the use of combustible materials on buildings more
than 18 metres high applies to everything that makes up the skin of a building, and that includes the insulation, not just the cladding. The 18-metre rule was of course introduced on the basis of advice from the expert panel. As I have said, if there is evidence to show that there are significant dangers to buildings that are less than 18 metres high, we will of course be happy to look into it.

I realise that Labour Members are trying to make this point, but I want to dispel the idea that we are complacent, because that is absolutely not the case. An enormous amount of effort, time and energy has been put into getting this right, and a large number of voices have been prayed in aid.

The hon. Gentleman is correct in saying that a defective industry has grown up over the last 20 odd or 30 years, under Governments of all stripes. As I said yesterday, the Grenfell disaster lifted a big flat rock from the building regulation system, which has not been functioning well for some time. It falls to me, and to the Secretary of State, to play our part in correcting that, and we are trying to do so with all speed.

**Andy Slaughter:** I am grateful for that “intervention”. I think that the Minister was using me as a kind of Ouija board to communicate with my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North, but that is fine.

**Kit Malthouse:** We are not short of time.

**Andy Slaughter:** Returning to the central point, what we all want is the Government to take a comprehensive view of these matters in respect of both existing and new buildings. My understanding is that only a selective number of existing buildings are covered, based on height, use and the type of material used. I ask the Minister to confirm how far their scrutiny goes at the moment, and explain why he thinks it should not go further. The Government did make announcements on new buildings back in October; they talked about high-rise residential buildings, including schools, hospitals, student accommodation and care homes. That excludes certain types of building—such as office buildings, as has been said—and we cannot see why that is the case.

**Emma Hardy:** The announcements fail to recognise that most schools are not particularly high. I do not understand why the Government do not include all schools in this list, or else they are pretty much ruling out every school in the country.

**Andy Slaughter:** Absolutely; and if the Minister did not like us quoting commercial companies in this way, perhaps he will listen to the Local Government Association. It continues to strongly urge the Government to ban the use of any combustible materials, including cladding panels, insulation and other materials, on the external walls of high-rise and high-risk buildings—including all hospitals, care homes, schools both residential and non-residential, and offices—of below, as well as above, 18 metres in height. That reinforces my hon. Friend’s point. I understand that the Government are considering height again, but hopefully they will do that quite quickly and come to the conclusion that it is a somewhat arbitrary determinant, because there are other factors, such as means of escape, that can control how easily buildings can be evacuated. That is why I say this is a very partial solution.

If the Government do not like the LGA, perhaps they should listen to the Association of British Insurers. In all my experience in the time that I have been here, the Government have been the greatest friends of the insurance industry, and that has been mutual, but in the briefing for this debate the ABI says that it “remains concerned over the limitations of the MHCLG ban, including the exclusion of buildings lower than 18m and limiting the ban to only care homes, hospitals and student accommodation. It makes no sense that someone can live in a high-rise residential building to which the ban applied but commute to work every day in an office block covered in combustible material.”

That is just common sense, but it comes from an industry body. I will wait to hear the Minister’s response on that.

There are other issues that go beyond fire safety. Some Members took the opportunity to raise them during yesterday’s urgent question, and the Minister commented yesterday that he was quite in favour of ‘60s and ‘70s buildings coming down per se—a radical solution, which was picked up by *Inside Housing*. I would give a qualified welcome to that: yes, if they are unsafe, unsuitable or not performing their function, but given the extraordinary high-rise shortage that the Government have presided over, perhaps the Minister should insist that we get rather more going up than coming down.

**Kit Malthouse:** What I said yesterday was that it was very often the case with buildings of the ‘60s and ‘70s that it was more efficient, and financially easier, to demolish and replace than to refurbish, and that many of these buildings, particularly LPC buildings, present technical difficulties that make them very expensive to deal with. I would add, frankly, that given the lessons over the years of high-rise living, councils should consider whether people would prefer to live in lower-rise, more gentle-density housing that could be provided on the same space.

**Andy Slaughter:** I will not be tempted into a wider debate, except to say to the Minister that it depends very much on the circumstances. Sometimes it is a matter of choice, and many high-rise buildings offer very good-quality accommodation and have good space standards. The space standards of the 1960s and 1970s often gave people very good, large accommodation, so I think he needs to be careful before wishing to be an iconoclast in quite the way that he does.

I find it deeply troubling that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North has said, there are still probably hundreds of thousands of people around the country living with insecurity. Nobody wants to exacerbate that unnecessarily. The Government must be clear and authoritative in the way that they present their plans to deal with the risks that Grenfell so tragically exposed. I will quote one more thing that the Minister said yesterday. He said in response to the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands):

“It can be extremely debilitating, concerning and worrying for any resident to have the future of their home mired in uncertainty. I hope that he gets the clarity that his residents need.”—[Official Report, 22 January 2019: Vol. 653, c. 137.]

He was responding to the right hon. Gentleman about a separate issue, which is being dealt with by the same local authority, Hammersmith and Fulham. I understand that that authority is being extremely responsible in relation to fire safety generally and also in relation to
the specific blocks that were mentioned there. Indeed, there is a council meeting tonight to discuss that. It is about dealing with the system-built blocks of which Ronan Point was an example. Some local authorities, including my own, are dealing with these matters very responsibly. I absolutely agree that residents need to be given certainty, so it is ironic that within a few minutes’ walk of those blocks that were being discussed yesterday there are two estates—the West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates—that have been under threat of demolition because of the actions taken by the previous Conservative council, in collusion with the regime at City Hall when the Minister was there. So we can all learn lessons from this.

On fire safety, the Government have a lot more to say and a lot more action to take, and I hope that the Minister will go some way towards doing that this afternoon by telling us what the Government’s intentions are now in relation to existing cladding systems and any future new buildings, of whatever type.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is an important debate, and it is true that we are not short of time, but before I call the next speaker, I want to stress that the principle that interventions from the Floor of the House should be short and to the point.

4.33 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): I was not going to speak, but given that we have more time than we anticipated, I shall make a few comments on the basis of the meeting—which I mentioned earlier—with members of the GMB heat and frost laggers’ branch in Dagenham. They are legendary in the sector for their knowledge of building materials and their compounds and properties, not least because they are the people who handle them. They also have a long-term legacy of dealing with the consequences—namely, an extraordinary profile of asbestos-related deaths and injuries—so it is in their interest to be acutely aware of the properties of the materials they are dealing with.

I am not a chemist, but given the nature of the debate and the brilliant speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), I think it is worth adding the contribution of those who deal with some these materials at the front end, including their introduction in high-rise properties such as Grenfell. Over the years, those people have briefed me on a number of the health and safety tests applied to installations and foams, and I want to address the question of foams specifically this afternoon. I will come to what they have told me in a minute, but it is worth reminding ourselves first of the minute, but it is worth reminding ourselves first of the context. It is the case that, post-Grenfell, as to the satisfactory status of some materials, some of the assumptions that were made, even post-Grenfell, are still deemed safe today; but that is not the point I really wished to raise this evening. My point is that tests are still coming to light that actually undermine some of the assumptions that were made, even post-Grenfell, as to the satisfactory status of some materials.

I know that sounds pretty complicated. I am not an expert on building regulations. Nevertheless, the devil really is in the detail. It appears that, with the Government test results and industry guidelines, phenolic insulation in combination with safer claddings is still deemed safe today; but that is not the point I really wished to raise this evening. My point is that tests are still coming to light that actually undermine some of the assumptions that were made, even post-Grenfell, as to the satisfactory status of some materials.

That is why I had a meeting this morning with several laggers to hear about their concerns, because my lagger friends have known for many years of the problems with phenolic foam. I am simply using that as an example to demonstrate some of the systemic problems and the lack of confidence in the system and its regulation, and to point to the need for the industry to put its hands up about what it has known for years and years—even decades—predating Grenfell, predating earlier fires.

For example, this morning I was given confidential technical report 41772 into the volatiles of phenolic foam, dated 18 September 2003—some 16 years ago. The tests found

“a wide range of organic compounds varying in chemical nature and volatility” contained in the foam. It was found that such products could release a “series of compounds toxic by inhalation, in contact with the skin and if swallowed, that can cause burns and have possible carcinogenic effects.”

The Government subsequently commissioned six large-scale tests that sought to establish which types of insulation could be used with each type of cladding, which relates back to the combination issues mentioned earlier. One type of combustible insulation identified was polysioxyanurate or PIR foam—the type of insulation used at Grenfell—and the other was traditional mineral wool insulation. However, I was informed this morning that the Government also commissioned a seventh test, the rationale being that not all plastic foams are alike. The original tests used only PIR foam insulation, but there is another popular type of combustible plastic foam known as phenolic foam, which is held to have quite different fire performance.

I want to focus on the consequences of that seventh test, because phenolic foam did indeed perform a little better than PIR foam, but it still failed the test. Phenolic foam was deemed to have failed the test after 28 minutes, compared with PIR’s 25 minutes. Altogether, that test means that the Government know of over 200 buildings with cladding that is of a configuration that failed the test post-Grenfell. However, it is my understanding, following this morning’s meeting, that the National House Building Council, which has the authority to sign off buildings, still appears prepared to sign off a variety of combustible insulation boards combined with cladding with a combustible core, having stated in 2017 that

“this is on the basis of...having reviewed a significant quantity of data”.

Therefore, as far as I am aware—this relates back to a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter)—building inspectors still appear to believe that phenolic insulation could be used safely with FR-grade aluminium panels.

I know that sounds pretty complicated. I am not an expert on building regulations. Nevertheless, the devil really is in the detail. It appears that, with the Government test results and industry guidelines, phenolic insulation in combination with safer claddings is still deemed safe today; but that is not the point I really wished to raise this evening. My point is that tests are still coming to light that actually undermine some of the assumptions that were made, even post-Grenfell, as to the satisfactory status of some materials.
That, of course, is bad enough, particularly for the laggers who administer such materials. However, the laggers came to see me and handed me that report because they are aware of details of some of these materials that have never come to light. If they are aware of them, that shows that they have no confidence in the system of regulation and the working knowledge in the Department of the properties of some of these materials.

The report goes on to state that compounds that are flammable, highly flammable or extremely flammable, such as acetaldehyde, can be released from the foam. I am not a chemist, but the compound that interested me most was methyl dioxolane, which “may form explosive peroxides”. A number of questions follow from that that have implications for our confidence in the system as whole. How long have we known about the possibility of extremely flammable and explosive properties in phenolic foam, which is widely used in signed-off cladding systems across the country? We should remember that these tests took place 14 years before the Grenfell fire. Given what we know, how is that foam still deemed safe, even after the post-Grenfell test results called that into question? Will the Government still assume that phenolic foam is safe? Is this foam still being administered?

Generally, the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North demonstrate the need to know more—way more—about these cladding systems, including the foams. Unless we get satisfactory answers to some of the questions he has asked, and that have been raised by the discovery of confidential reports on the compounds released by materials such as phenolic foam, how can we expect our residents to feel reassured? I am more than prepared to hand the Minister this report as an example of some of the combustible properties of the materials that are signed off in the present building regulations.

4.40 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I commend the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), notwithstanding his partial recitation of Government policy in this area, for recognising the importance of fire safety and cladding, and for securing this debate. I am always grateful for the chance to talk on a subject of such importance as fire safety and ensuring that residents are safe, and feel safe, in their homes.

I take this opportunity to express my sorrow at the obvious emotional distress caused to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and others by the Shurgard fire. He spoke very movingly about the fire’s impact, particularly on families who are between homes, and I recognise the distress it may cause. Although I am sure he will recognise that building regulations are largely focused on preserving life, I nevertheless recognise the importance of what he says, and I will come back to that later.

A tragedy like Grenfell should never have happened in 2017, and this Government are determined to ensure that such a tragedy can never happen again. In the immediate aftermath of the fire, we acted quickly to establish a comprehensive building safety programme, which has involved many people working tirelessly to identify and remediate buildings with unsafe cladding. We also established the independent expert panel to advise the Secretary of State on immediate measures, and we agreed to fund a comprehensive testing programme for all building owners to establish whether their units are cladded with unsafe ACM material. We have also worked with local authorities and with fire and rescue services, as I have explained, to implement interim safety measures in all buildings to ensure that people remain completely safe in their homes until remediation is completed.

Through the testing and the hard work of local authorities, we are confident that we have identified all social housing in England with unsafe ACM cladding systems. We have made good progress in making those buildings permanently safe. Of the 159 social sector buildings, 118 have either started or completed remediation. There are plans and commitments in place to remediate the remaining 41 buildings. To help to ensure swift progress, we have made £400 million-worth of funding available to social sector landlords to fund the removal and replacement of unsafe ACM cladding.

However, I regret that remediation in the private sector has been more challenging, with negotiations in some instances disappointingly slow. Since Grenfell, we have worked intensively with local authorities to identify and collect data on high-rise buildings with ACM cladding. We have also provided £1.3 million of funding to assist local authorities in that work. Local authorities across England have assessed around 6,000 private sector high-rise buildings. They have needed to take samples to test and, in some cases, take legal action to get owners to co-operate. We have taken strong action to give local authorities the support they need to enforce the removal and replacement of unsafe cladding, we have established a taskforce chaired by me and the Secretary of State to actively oversee the remediation of private sector buildings, and we have set up a joint inspection team to support local authorities and to give them the confidence to pursue enforcement action.

On 29 November 2018, the Government went further and announced that we will back local authorities to step in and take emergency remedial action where building owners are not co-operating in the remediation of cladding. This includes financial support, where necessary, to enable the local authority to carry out the emergency work. As a result of our interventions, we have made progress on securing commitments from owners to replace unsafe cladding. At the end of December, of the 268 privately-owned buildings, 212 have either started or completed remediation, or have commitments in place to remediate. There remain 56 private buildings where the owners’ plans are unclear. That number has fallen from over 200 buildings last June.

We remain concerned about and engaged with the many leaseholders who find themselves in this difficult situation through no fault of their own. We have made it clear that we expect building owners in the private sector to protect leaseholders from the costs of remediation, either by funding it themselves, or by looking to alternative routes such as insurance claims, warranties or legal action. A growing list of companies have done the right thing by protecting leaseholders, including Barratt Developments, which has agreed to fund remediation at Citiscape in the constituency of the hon. Member for Croydon North.
I am pleased to say that I sought and received confirmation that Barratt has started on site this week and is on site today.

The Government have made the remediation of ACM cladding a priority. That is because our large-scale testing programme has conclusively shown the particularly high risk posed by that form of cladding. However, it would be wrong to say that that has been our only focus. The expert panel has regularly considered the risks of non-ACM material and the action we should take. As a result, in December 2018, we issued updated advice to building owners about how to investigate non-ACM cladding systems on their buildings, and how to remediate them. In addition, we have commissioned the Building Research Establishment to conduct a testing programme on non-ACM materials, and we expect the first test results by the summer. We have also issued specific advice on other fire safety risks, for example, spandrel panels and external wall insulation.

However, it is clear that, while we must do all we can to protect people now, we need a systemic overhaul, as several hon. Members have pointed out. With that in mind, we commissioned Dame Judith Hackitt to undertake an independent review of building regulations and fire safety. Her report concluded that the current system is not fit for purpose, and charted the direction for a radical new system.

There is no question but that such a change will take time. None the less, the Government have not hesitated, and will not hesitate, to act where we can make a difference now—today. That has been clear for all to see, as we have gone further than the review’s recommendations, including banning combustible cladding. Regulations were laid in November to give effect to the ban, ensuring that cladding of that nature is no longer allowed on the external walls of new buildings over 18 metres containing flats. We are also testing and trialling elements of the new system to ensure that they are effective before they are implemented at scale.

Mr Reed: The Minister talks about the ban for residential blocks over 18 metres high. What evidence does he have to show that hotels and office blocks over 18 metres are safer than residential blocks? Why has that led him to exclude them from the ban?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue, which the expert panel has obviously considered. I would be happy to write to him with its considerations. In broad terms, it has focused on ensuring that purely residential buildings, where people sleep overnight, are inherently safe.

Mr Reed: Hotels!

Kit Malthouse: Exactly. Although the hon. Gentleman is right to say that people sleep overnight in hotels, staff members are present in hotels and office buildings. There is always an awake watch in a hotel and that is not necessarily the case in a residential block. However, those matters are obviously open to review, and if the hon. Gentleman wants to put forward evidence that contradicts the expert panel’s, I will be more than happy to consider it. On all the issues, I do not want to give hon. Members the impression that our mind is closed. If evidence is presented to show that measures should be taken because there is a significant safety concern in buildings other than high-rise residential buildings, we will be happy to look at it.

Mr Reed: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again and for saying that he is keeping an open mind on these issues. That is the right thing to do, and I commend him for it. He mentioned the independent expert panel again. I reiterate a point that I tried to make in my speech. An expert panel is not fully independent if some of its members have a financial interest in a particular outcome. Will he commit to reviewing the panel to ensure that there are no such conflicts of interest?

Kit Malthouse: I am happy to review the panel, but I have confidence in its members and the advice that they are giving, not least because they are a plurality of voices. The panel does include Dame Judith Hackitt, along with several other people who have been involved in the fire and rescue service over the years, but I am happy to review its membership, as we would do generally, to make sure that we have the right range of expertise thereon.

As part of our plans, we also have our new joint regulators group and our early adopters group. They have come forward to help to drive culture change and demonstrate that the industry can put building safety first. I recognise, though, that there is much more to do. Our implementation plan, which we published before Christmas, sets out what the far-reaching overhaul of the system will involve over the coming years. The work spans four areas: first, a stronger, more effective regulatory and accountability framework; secondly, clearer standards and guidance to support better understanding by those carrying out building work of what is required to make buildings safe. This is an area in which we have already taken action, by consulting on a clarified approved document B to enable the guidance to be revised. We have also completed a consultation on restricting the use of desktop studies and published amended guidance on this matter. Thirdly and most crucially, a stronger voice for residents will be at the heart of the new system. Finally, the implementation plan sets out how we will work with industry to help it to prioritise public safety and lead the culture change—a change that we all agree is badly needed.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Minister address one specific point? We have seen the conversion of a lot of office buildings for residential use, which the Government have been promoting for some time under the permitted development rules. A lot of these conversions are of poor quality and, frankly, the buildings are unsuitable for residential use, but they have been converted anyway. I understand that, if that happens in future, the building regulations will subject converted buildings to the same requirements as new builds, but what about those that have already been converted? Will the Minister look into that specific issue in relation to cladding?

Kit Malthouse: Buildings that have already been converted and are within scope should have been part of the local authority inspection regime to ensure that they are safe. All buildings obviously have to comply with fire safety regulations and the local fire and rescue service should be engaged. I am more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with the details on
how we are dealing retrospectively with buildings that were converted under permitted development rights.

Before I close my speech, let me turn to a couple of the specific points that were raised. On self-storage, as I said to the hon. Member for Croydon North, current regulations are focused on life safety and have been for many years. Pleasingly, the number of deaths and injuries in commercial fires is very low, but that does not mean to say that we should be complacent and should not consider the issue. We have called for evidence on the review of approved document B and therefore do not rule out any changes to commercial fire regulations in those circumstances as well.

Following Grenfell, all schools, colleges and universities have been contacted to tell them to carry out building checks. All schools have to follow a range of strict fire safety regulations, which are designed to ensure that schools are as safe as possible and extremely well prepared in the event of a fire. The Department for Education has conducted an exercise to review all its buildings and has taken action where necessary. We continue to work closely with the Department.

Emma Hardy: May I ask the Minister again to look into reviewing whether to put schools on to the building safety list, because they are currently not on it? I would be grateful if he would take that away and look into it again.

Kit Malthouse: I am certainly happy to investigate that issue but, as I say, one of the delineations that the expert panel has made in its the consideration of safety is the notion of residence and people sleeping overnight in a building. As the hon. Lady will know, all schools have to conduct regular fire drills to make sure that they are prepared. It is also worth remembering that, sadly, fires happen in all sorts of buildings, many of which do not have cladding on them. There are all manner of buildings made from materials that are potentially flammable—wood, asphalt or whatever it might be—so we need to be proportionate in respect of the risk, while bearing in mind that we want to minimise it in all circumstances.

Mr Reed: I take all the points the Minister makes in a generous spirit, but parents clearly would not want there to be flammable cladding on their children’s school, whatever other fire safety measures are in place. It is a simple thing to do, so why do not the Government just ban its use on new school buildings?

Mr Reed: I take all the points the Minister makes in a generous spirit, but parents clearly would not want there to be flammable cladding on their children’s school, whatever other fire safety measures are in place. It is a simple thing to do, so why do not the Government just ban its use on new school buildings?

Kit Malthouse: As I have said, the Department for Education has conducted an exercise in which buildings have been reviewed and measures have been taken to ensure that those buildings are safe. I speak as somebody who has two children at school, and I understand that schools go through their fire drill, have fire doors, know where all the children are and are very focused on the notion of fire safety. I am more than happy to have a think about the point the hon. Gentleman makes. As I say, we constantly keep these things under review, and the vehicle for that will be the review of approved document B in the building regulations in all circumstances.

I am not saying no, but the hon. Gentleman would expect us to have a proportionate response that minimises the threat of fire in all circumstances. If we were to extend his thinking, we might say that we do not actually want anybody in a wooden building. A single-storey wooden building—a mobile classroom or whatever it might be—is an issue that we need to think about. [Interruption.] I understand, but that is why height matters. The particular height of 18 metres has been selected by the expert panel.

As I have said, I am happy to keep that under review, and my mind remains open. The hon. Gentleman would expect me, I hope, to be constructive in such a way. None of us has an interest in there being fire casualties; we all have an interest in getting this right. My objection to the tone of some of his speech was that he should not infer that we do not care. Indeed, there is a huge amount of effort to get this right, both politically and on the part of the remarkably hard-working and dedicated civil servants in the Department. That is why we have a comprehensive work programme, with lots of calls for evidence. A number of groups are meeting to discuss the various issues and early adopters are moving towards a new building regulations system. As I have said, it is quite obvious that Grenfell tragedy lifted a big flat rock on a system that has not been working for many years, and our commitment is absolutely to get that right.

My understanding is that phenolic foam is covered by the ban. However, I will commission a report from the Department to give me a quick review of the points raised by the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) to satisfy myself about our approach on that particular issue. I recognise his point about the potential toxicity of fumes that may occur, whatever the height of the building. We ought to have a look at that, and I am more than happy to do so.

This is a major programme of work—now slightly more major, given the undertakings I have made to do some more work—but it is one that deserves the challenge we face. It ensures that everyone with a stake in keeping people safe plays their part, and it is the programme we need to rebuild public trust and to deliver meaningful and lasting change. I believe that this is the best tribute we can offer to those who lost their lives at Grenfell Tower and those who are left behind.

Once again, let me thank the hon. Member for Croydon North for securing this valuable debate. I want to assure him and everybody in the House that this Government are determined to learn the lessons of Grenfell Tower and to ensure that nothing like it can ever happen again.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to correct today’s record. Earlier, when the motion on private Members’ Bills was being discussed in a point of order, the hon. Member for Chichester said that amendment (b) had been proposed by the Labour spokesperson for the environment, which is, of course, me. I was quite surprised to hear that, as it was not something that I had done.
I just want to set the record straight to confirm that it was the Labour spokesperson for communities who had put forward amendment (b) to the motion on private Members’ Bills.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me prior notice of it. I think that she did try to contact the hon. Member for—I think—Chichester. [Interruption.] Sorry, Christchurch. The hon. Lady has contacted the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and she has, obviously, put the record straight.

Question put and agreed to.

5 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Devolved Administrations: Discussions

1. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations on the UK leaving the EU. [908744]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The hon. Lady asks about recent discussions. Having been in post for just over two months, all my discussions seem fairly recent. She will be aware that on my first day in post I met the devolved Administrations as a priority. I have had meetings with the Prime Minister and the First Minister of Scotland. Indeed, the Prime Minister met the First Minister again yesterday, and they had a phone conversation last week.

Dr Whitford: This week’s report from the Institute for Government suggests that Whitehall Departments are not yet prepared for Brexit, deal or no deal. The UK Government started talking last summer about stockpiling, so why was the list of critical drugs not shared with the Scottish Government until just before Christmas?

Stephen Barclay: I think that the assessment in Whitehall is that Whitehall is more prepared than the devolved Administrations. We are looking to work closely with the devolved Administrations. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has been very clear that medicines and medical products are our No. 1 priority for the supply of goods, and the extra ferry capacity has been purchased with that very much in mind.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If the discussions were about the maintenance of frictionless trade, a customs union of itself will not deliver that, will it?

Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not just about what tariffs apply; it is also about what regulations apply on non-tariff barriers. Much of the debate in this place is about tariffs, but standards and regulations are also relevant.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know from his discussions how concerned the Welsh Government are about the prospect of a no-deal exit—the Prime Minister was told that last night. The Secretary of State will also have seen the comments from the chief executive of Airbus this morning, and his stark warning about no deal. Will he therefore take this opportunity to condemn the comments of his Conservative MEP colleague David Bannerman, who described Mr Enders’s warning as “a German CEO putting EU interests first before his own employees”?

Stephen Barclay: I take very seriously the warning from the chief executive of Airbus, but I remind the hon. Lady that he supports the Prime Minister’s deal. Many in business regard the deal as the way of delivering certainty through the implementation period. There is a lot of positivity with Airbus. If I look at the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) has done to champion the “wing of the future” at the research and development centre there, I see that there is huge opportunity. What the chief executive and others in the business community are clear about is that they want a deal in order to avoid the uncertainty of no deal, and that is why they are backing the Prime Minister.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Welsh lamb producers send 90% of their exports to the European Union. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, they will face an effective tariff rate of 46%, so how are the UK Government working with the Welsh Government to support our farmers in this very serious situation?

Stephen Barclay: We are talking closely with the Welsh farming community, as are Members on both sides of the House. The Prime Minister was at the Royal Welsh Show last year as part of that engagement. The hon. Gentleman will know that the National Farmers Union in Wales, and indeed across the United Kingdom, has made it clear that the best way of supporting farmers is by backing the deal.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Prime Minister has promised that her discussions with the devolved nations and the Opposition parties will be without preconditions, so clearly she will not refuse even to discuss the prospect of extending article 50, because that would be a precondition; she will not refuse even to discuss the prospect of taking no deal off the table, because that would be a precondition; and she will not refuse even to discuss the possibility of giving the people another say, because that would be a precondition. Can the Secretary of State therefore confirm on the record that all those topics will be available for discussion, in honour of the Prime Minister’s promise that there will be no preconditions?

Stephen Barclay: The Prime Minister was clear in her statement to the House on Monday that there are no preconditions. That is why she is engaging not just with the devolved Administrations; today I will be joining her for meetings with trade union leaders as part of that engagement. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the extension of article 50 is not a unilateral decision—it requires the consent of the other 27 member states. However, the main issue, and in fact, probably the only
Peter Grant: The Prime Minister was very clear in her statement to the House that there were no preconditions. She has been equally clear in a letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) that there are preconditions. The Secretary of State, and indeed the Prime Minister, will be becoming only too well aware that within probably a fairly short time the UK Government will be bombarding Scotland with promises about how much they love us, how equal a partner we are, and how much they want us to stay. Can I suggest to the Secretary of State that if he expects the people of Scotland to be conned by those false promises again in 2019, he should at the very least make sure that his Prime Minister stops breaking the promises she made to the people of Scotland last week?

Stephen Barclay: Let me just say very gently to the hon. Gentleman that the con is to have a referendum and then say that one will not honour the result. We had a referendum on independence in Scotland. The Scottish people spoke very clearly in that. I suspect that one of the reasons for that was that the trading relationship within the United Kingdom is the most economically beneficial to them. Having taken that decision, the next referendum was on a UK-wide basis, and it needs to be respected on that basis.

Support for Farmers

2. Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What recent discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU?

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I continue to have regular conversations with ministerial colleagues across Government on all aspects of exiting the EU, including support for farmers. The Agriculture Bill will allow us to break free of the common agricultural policy and help our farming sector to become more profitable while sustaining our natural environment.

Glyn Davies: I, too, want to ask about sheep farming, which is economically very significant in my constituency. It is an industry that, for many decades, has been underpinned by an EU payments system. There is major concern that this support system will be changed too abruptly for the industry to cope as the UK leaves the European Union. What reassurances can the Secretary of State give to the sheep farmers of Montgomeryshire that that will not be the case, and that changes will be gradual and manageable and not destroy the industry?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. One of the main reassurances to those farmers, I suspect, is knowing that they have such a champion of their interests in my hon. Friend. In terms of the policy, the Government have pledged to commit the same cash total in funds for farm support for the duration of this Parliament, providing much needed certainty to farmers and landowners. The Agriculture Bill includes a seven-year transition period for direct payments to provide further stability for farmers, giving comfort to them as they look to a brighter future.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Farmers in my constituency tell me that the majority of grain exports go to the European Union, and they are very concerned about the risk of the imposition of tariffs in the event of no deal, or indeed after the end of the transition period, when arrangements are very uncertain. What assurances can the Government give them?

Stephen Barclay: We have already covered the fact that there is an issue for the farming community in terms of tariffs. That is why I advocate a deal and those voting against a deal need to explain the impact of that issue to farmers. However, polls are obviously selective, but a poll taken in Farmers Weekly showed that a majority of farmers supported leaving the EU. I suspect that that was because they see a brighter future where we can have high animal welfare standards and good environmental standards, building on the reforms set out in the Agriculture Bill. So instead of talking down the opportunity of Brexit for farmers, this House should be looking at the opportunities that a green Brexit will deliver.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister might know that as the chair of my party’s Back-Bench DEFRA committee, I think there are at last real signs that preparation for farming and farmers has been quite significant. However, that contrasts distinctly with what has been happening with the Secretary of State for International Trade. Has the Brexit Secretary seen the disgraceful remarks that his colleague made in Davos yesterday? Has he seen the front page of The Times, which says that 100 companies are going to the Netherlands, to Ireland and to France? What is he going to do, talking to colleagues, actually to get things moving?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman talks about disgraceful comments from Davos, but I do not want to dwell too much on what Tony Blair may or may not have said. The hon. Gentleman makes a serious point, which is that timing is of the essence for the business community. Businesses face decisions about their no-deal planning, and they want the certainty of the deal that the Prime Minister has to offer. Opposition Members who have tabled amendments that seek to delay the level of uncertainty need to ask themselves how that uncertainty and delay is helping the business community, who need to get on in the real world and make those decisions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): With special reference to the farming community in Northern Ireland, what discussions have been held with the permanent secretary for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs at the Northern Ireland Assembly regarding the transport of livestock beyond March?

Stephen Barclay: I know that the hon. Gentleman has considerable expertise and takes a deep interest in that issue. He will know that there have been extensive discussions within the Department for Environment,
Food and Rural Affairs on that very issue, and I am happy to liaise with him and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on it.

Secretary of State for Scotland: Discussions

3. Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Scotland on the UK leaving the EU. [908747]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The Secretary of State has regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues and has discussed EU exit with the Secretary of State for Scotland on a number of occasions, including at the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU negotiations, the most recent meeting of which was on 19 December. We also regularly engage with the Scottish Government, including through the Ministerial Forum on EU negotiations, and I look forward to attending the next meeting of that in Edinburgh next week.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the Minister for his response. Thousands of jobs in my constituency and beyond rely on programmes such as Horizon 2020 and Erasmus and the freedom of movement on which universities depend. Given the short timescales, what reassurance can he give to universities that those programmes will continue and that we can fully participate in them?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I have met a number of the Scottish universities to discuss that issue. It is right that universities in Scotland and across the UK are at the forefront of programmes such as Horizon 2020, which is why we have negotiated a deal that specifically envisages participation in them. We have had a positive reaction from the European Union to that. Of course, we need to secure the deal in order to secure the next round of talks and ensure we can take that forward. In the meantime, the Government have guaranteed Horizon funding until the end of the current multi-annual financial framework.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Has the Secretary of State for Scotland told the Minister whether he supports the statement from other Scottish Tory MPs, none of whom could be bothered to be here today, that they will try to block any attempt to include Scottish Government representatives in future negotiations with the EU?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union have been clear that we are committed to giving the devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Government, an enhanced role in the next phase of negotiations. My Scottish Conservative colleagues have been strong champions of the devolution settlement and Scotland’s place in the Union.

Scientific, Cultural and Educational Programmes

4. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the provision of scientific, cultural and educational programmes in the UK’s future relationship with the EU. [908748]

Mr Walker: Discussions between the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union have been clear that we are committed to ensuring that the UK can continue to participate in EU programmes in future. Will the Minister have a similar arrangement.

Mrs Latham: Organisations such as Sadler’s Wells and the Royal Ballet and many other cultural organisations recruit people from around the world, and some of them come from Europe. What protections will there be for people such as the excellent dancers we need to come to this country to promote tourism?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a cultural ambassador for this country, for the great work she does in promoting the performing arts. It is absolutely the intention of Her Majesty’s Government to support the great range of talent that comes into this country, and there is no reason why that should be in any way impaired as we go forward.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman knows all about science, culture and education because he represents Cambridge.

Daniel Zeichner: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. The political declaration makes it very clear that the Government want to maintain a close involvement with EU programmes in future. Will the Minister have a word with the Secretary of State, who is a fellow east of England MP, to see if he shares my disappointment at the reports that the long-established and well-regarded East of England Brussels office faces possible closure? Will he join me in making representations to the East of England Local Government Association?
Kwasi Kwarteng: I would of course be very happy to undertake conversations with my right hon. Friend on the hon. Gentleman’s behalf, and I suggest that perhaps the hon. Gentleman takes part in them, too. The principal issue is obviously about scientists; offices in themselves are not what this relationship is about. As a fellow graduate of Cambridge University, I applaud his efforts in representing the town and the university in this place.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC) rose—

Mr Speaker: It would be good to hear the voice of Ceredigion as well.

Ben Lake: Diolch, Mr Speaker. In addition to ensuring participation in the European Union framework programme for research and innovation, it is just as crucial that immigration policy facilitates and, indeed, supports research conducted by teams consisting of members from an array of European countries. What discussions have there been with the Home Office to ensure that UK immigration policy aligns with the Government’s priorities in this regard?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have a labour mobility framework that especially ensures that highly skilled people are able to come into this country. There is a lot of doom-mongering and fear-mongering on this subject. It is absolutely the intention to keep an open policy for highly skilled, highly talented people to come into this country and contribute enormously to our society.

Contingency Planning: EU Member States

5. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to co-operate with other EU member states on contingency planning for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): I thank my hon. Friend for his question, but it prompts me to ask in reply why on earth he is not backing the deal that delivers the certainty that all the businesses that he named have asked for. He needs to look once again at the deal, and deliver the certainty that businesses across the UK require.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): When the Minister meets his opposite numbers in individual member states, does he take the opportunity to stress that they could stand down their plans for a no-deal scenario if the EU collectively showed some flexibility regarding the Irish backstop, so that a deal could then be settled?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Obviously, I look forward to getting a deal over the line, and as the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee knows, I believe that leaving without a deal is “sub-optimal”. In all conversations that every Minister has with representatives and Ministers from member states, we are pushing exactly the case that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has said that no deal would be “catastrophic”, and that plants will close and jobs will be lost. I do not understand why the Government do not rule out no deal, but if they will not, why not hold a series of indicative votes, as recommended by the Exiting the European Union Committee, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), on the different options for going forward, such as staying in the customs union? The Government know that their deal does not have a majority and that we must now move to the next stages. Why will they not do that?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She and I co-existed in the European Parliament for a time, back when I was younger and she was the same age as she is now. She will understand that her constituents voted to leave the European Union, and they expect us to deliver on the result of that referendum. The one way of doing that is by having a deal. Over the regulations, and we look forward to engaging with the Commission and other member states on the detail of these proposals to ensure that they deliver continuity. The UK has the third largest aviation network in the world. Air travel is vital for both the UK and the EU in connecting people and businesses, and he needs no pointers from me to the statistics demonstrating how important this matter is for many EU destinations for UK tourists.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): In a week in which P&O has announced that it is reflagging its entire cross-channel fleet in Cyprus, Sony is following Panasonic in moving its European headquarters from the UK to the Netherlands and Airbus has warned of potentially very harmful decisions if the UK crashes out without a deal, including future investment going elsewhere—

I would definitely describe that as sub-optimal—when are the Government going to make their own announcement that under no circumstances will they allow the UK to leave without a deal, so we can stop this slow and damaging haemorrhage?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee for his question, but it
course of the referendum she and I have debated all the different difficulties that there will be in getting a deal across the line. We have a very good deal on the table—she should vote for it.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Earlier this week the chief executive of the civil service publicly confirmed what Ministers know and the public suspect, which is that despite the huge amounts of money being thrown at it, the Government will not be fully prepared to exit the European Union in 64 days’ time without a deal. Will the Minister finally come clean with the public and admit that a no-deal exit on 29 March is not just “sub-optimal”, it is simply not a viable option?

Chris Heaton-Harris: This House voted to activate article 50, and the legislation before us means that we will leave the European Union on 29 March. I would very much prefer to leave with a deal, as would the hon. Gentleman, and I think he should vote for it.

Agricultural Policy

6. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on agricultural policy after the UK leaves the EU. [908751]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): We continue to have regular conversations across the Government and with ministerial colleagues on all aspects of exiting the European Union, and agricultural policy is a key part of that. The Agriculture Bill is part of the Government’s programme of legislation to deliver a smooth exit from the EU, and as the Secretary of State said, we must seize the opportunities of a green Brexit and break from the EU’s common agricultural policy.

Damien Moore: Does the Minister agree that the Agriculture Bill presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to help our farmers, protect our environment, and be part of the fourth agricultural revolution?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—I am still trying to work out what the first three agricultural revolutions were, but I fully support his sentiment. The Bill constitutes the first major agricultural reform in the UK for more than 70 years, and we will support our farming industries, as we have done as a Government since the 1920s and long before we joined the European Economic Community. The Bill will also allow us to break from the EU’s common agricultural policy, and it is an incredibly positive and dynamic step forward.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): A no-deal Brexit would mean that the UK would not be listed as an approved country for agricultural exports to the EU. Gaining that status could take months to negotiate. Given that almost a third of sheep production in the UK goes to the EU, what discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about compensating sheep farmers for the potential loss of that market?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We are absolutely focused on delivering the deal. The hon. Gentleman has expressed very clearly the dangers and pitfalls of no deal, while at the same time people in his party are complaining about the dangers of no deal, yet refusing to back the deal. That is completely irresponsible. I urge the hon. Gentleman to encourage his colleagues to back the deal.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to secure citizenship rights for (a) UK citizens residing in the EU and (b) EU citizens residing in the UK after the UK leaves the EU. [908752]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): EU citizens will be able to stay in all scenarios under the EU settlement scheme. As the Prime Minister announced this week, we will waive the application fee, removing any financial barrier for them to do so. We are working with member states to understand how they will protect UK nationals in all scenarios. I am pleased that some, like Cyprus and the Netherlands, have published such plans.

Bob Blackman: That will clearly be good news for the 13,000 EU citizens that live in my constituency, providing certainty going forward, but will the Minister make further efforts to ensure that the European Union provides reciprocal rights to all UK citizens that live in the EU?

Mr Walker: Yes, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right: not only are the EU citizens in all our constituencies valued members of our communities, but of course the UK nationals in other EU member states are also valued members of their communities. This is really important. We shall be urging our EU counterparts to echo the reassurances that we have given for UK nationals living in their country, and to provide reciprocal protections.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Although waiving the £65 charge is, of course, very welcome, it still leaves EU citizens as second-class citizens in a country they have chosen to make their home—if not the citizens of nowhere, in that disgraceful phrase used by our Prime Minister. Would the Government consider covering any reasonable costs that EU citizens might incur in securing their settled status, beyond the £65 charge that has been waived?

Mr Walker: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s welcome for the Government’s decision in this respect, but it is important to say that this is a simple digital scheme—one that should be easy and straightforward to apply to. The Government are providing help and assistance, ensuring that we invest substantial resources in making the scheme work for EU citizens.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I wrote to the Minister immediately after the no-deal paper on citizenship rights was published on 6 December, seeking clarification on points that appeared to reduce rights previously granted in the withdrawal agreement, but I have had no response. One question was: why have the Government made it more difficult for EU citizens to secure their rights, by bringing forward the deadline for settled status applications, so that in a chaotic period, without a transition, applicants would have not six extra months but six fewer months to confirm their status? If the Government cannot answer such basic questions after five weeks, does it not confirm that they are simply not prepared for no deal?

Mr Walker: I am surprised to hear that the hon. Gentleman has not had an answer, because I have certainly signed one off. I am sorry if it has not reached him. I shall investigate that matter and check.

In the unsought-for event of no deal, there would be 21 months after we leave the EU for people to register for the scheme. Obviously, the same implementation period would not be in place, so that actually offers a longer period after the change in circumstances than the six-month grace period on offer in a deal scenario.

Automotive Sector

8. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of the automotive sector on the UK leaving the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): The Department has engaged extensively with the automotive sector to understand its priorities as we leave the EU. We met leading manufacturers in summits at Chevening House last year. Those were held with the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders. It is a dialogue that we are keen to pursue.

Mr Cunningham: Over 800,000 people are involved in the automobile industry. What views did they pass on to the Minister, and what concerns did they express to him, about the Brexit deal? Can he answer that question?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Absolutely. It is a very simple question to answer: people in the automotive sector, the businessmen we talked to—as across many other industries—have all said that they want to see a deal. They want certainty, and they want to be able to plan for the future, which is why, as I have said many times, we want to land the deal—we need a deal.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The Government are pretending that they would take this country out without a deal at the end of March. This morning, the CEO of Airbus said:

“Please don’t listen to the Brexiteers’ madness which asserts that, because we have huge plants here, we will not move and we will always be here. They are wrong.”

Airbus alone employs 14,000 people in the UK. The Prime Minister is using hundreds of thousands of UK jobs as leverage with her own MPs. Is it not now time for the Prime Minister to tell the truth, that she will not take the UK out of the EU on 29 March without a deal?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady will understand that the current legal position is that if we get to 29 March without a deal, we will leave without a deal. That is the legal position. The hon. Lady will have read the remarks of the CEO of Airbus and she will have noticed that further on he says very explicitly that he, his industry and his business need clarity. We have to vote for a deal. We have always said that the deal is our favoured option, which is why we want to see it over the line.

Jenny Chapman: If the hon. Gentleman insists that his Government are ready to take us out without a deal in nine weeks’ time, what will he do to support the hundreds of thousands of manufacturing workers whose jobs would be threatened?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We are committed to investing £4 billion in the industry over the next few years. There is no doubt that a deal is our favoured option—that is why we encourage Labour Members to support the deal. It
seems ridiculous to me that they complain about no deal while at the same time opposing the deal. That is like complaining about the rain and then rejecting the use of an umbrella when we offer it to them. It is absolute madness. That is why I urge the hon. Lady to back the deal.

Universities

9. Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): What recent discussions has he had with representatives of the university sector on the UK leaving the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Ministers and officials engage extensively with the university sector to understand their issues with and priorities for EU exit. I have held a number of bilateral meetings with university leaders and, later this afternoon, I will join the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), for my regular EU exit meeting with the sector.

Rosie Duffield: Both of my large universities in Canterbury tell me that they have had no communication whatever from the Brexit Secretary, his Ministers or his Department. Given that 10% of their students and 25% of their staff are from the EU, and they are heavily involved in research programmes, as we have heard this morning, will the Minister or his Department reach out to my universities? I am sure that he will be welcome in Canterbury.

Mr Walker: I would be happy to do that. We have had contact with universities directly and through their various representative bodies—Universities UK, the Russell Group, MillionPlus and so on. I am happy to ensure that those universities have been contacted directly by our Department, because it is important that we engage with all universities on such matters.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): A number of university students have been traumatised by remainers saying that they will no longer be able to participate in the Erasmus programme. Will my hon. Friend—if he is not right honourable, he should be—reassure them that the programme is open not only to students in the European Union, but to those in Canada, Israel and other countries outside the EU?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend has made an excellent point. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), mentioned Israel in this context earlier. It is true that Erasmus has a number of non-EU participants, and it is clear that the UK has ambitions to continue its cultural co-operation with the EU even after we have left.

Contingency Planning: No Deal

10. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What recent discussions has the Government had with local authorities on contingency planning for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): The Department obviously engages closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that local authorities are prepared for EU exit in any scenario. On Wednesday I had an opportunity to meet the mayoral forum, and later today I shall be speaking to the Local Government Association.

Helen Goodman: Last week I met representatives of Durham County Council, who told me that central Government had not been able to give them any scenarios or planning decisions, and that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government had no money whatsoever to help local authorities to plan for contingencies in the event of no deal. Is this no-deal planning a bluff, or is it just a sign of the Government’s sheer incompetence?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I do not think we recognise the way in which the hon. Lady has characterised the Government’s engagement with local authorities. We have recognised the need for much more localised planning. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has established a delivery board and chief executive-level advisory groups. We have held four national conferences, which have been attended by 350 senior local authority officers and 200 councils. There is much more engagement, and means and money, behind our commitment to ensuring that this country is prepared in the event of a no-deal scenario.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Is it the Government’s position that if we need additional time in which to agree a deal that will pass through the House, they will crash out on 29 March rather than extending article 50 and giving us time to negotiate that position?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I have said many times, the Government’s position is that we will land a deal and ensure that we leave with that deal on 29 March.

Second EU Referendum

12. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Whether the Government plan to bring forward legislative proposals to hold a second referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The Government will not hold a second referendum, and will not introduce any legislation to enable one to be held.

Martyn Day: I kind of expected that answer from the Secretary of State. However, the Prime Minister will return to Parliament in a week’s time and expect MPs to vote again on her deal. If it is acceptable for them to have a second vote, why is it not acceptable for the public to have one?

Stephen Barclay: It seems to me that some MPs do not want a second vote. They had already voted to give the British public a say in the referendum; then they voted to trigger article 50, and then they voted to include the date in the Bill that became the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. It is not really a great look for the public for people to say, “We got it wrong three times, but give us a fourth go.”
Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): In the light of today’s deeply concerning statements from Airbus, will the Secretary of State tell us first how many workers the Government are willing to see made redundant in order to keep the Conservative party together, and secondly whether those workers deserve the democratic right to a people’s vote?

Stephen Barclay: The crux of the issue is that the industries concerned want a deal and support the deal. The hon. Gentleman’s party, and indeed he, stood on a manifesto commitment to delivering on the biggest vote in our history. The issue for those workers whose jobs are in question—and the question that the hon. Gentleman needs to answer for them—is why he is going back on a manifesto that he gave his own voters.

Business Community

13. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of the business community on the UK leaving the EU.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Concerns have been raised with me by the road haulage industry about the burden of the extra customs paperwork that will be required in the event of no deal. What estimate has the Department made of the additional time and cost that they will incur in that event?

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): The businesses in my constituency include many international companies that are headquartered there, such as BASF, which produces chemicals. It wants to ensure it can continue to access EU frameworks such as REACH—the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals regulations—and the European Chemicals Agency. It faces tens of millions of pounds in costs in the event of a no-deal Brexit, particularly through migrating its EU registration. Does my hon. Friend agree that associate membership of such agencies, for which the withdrawal agreement provides, is vital to the success of these key industries?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and at this very moment we are negotiating the precise arrangements. She is right to mention the withdrawal agreement, because extensive passages in that agreement relate to exactly the type of co-operation and participation that she describes. We are focused on this, and hope that we can reach a good conclusion.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Airbus employs 14,000 people in this country, and we have a valuable and important aerospace manufacturing cluster in Wolverhampton. The chief executive of Airbus said today:

“Brexit is threatening to destroy a century of development based on education, research and human capital.”

Is it not the case that the rich men who drove this project can move their money, their investments and their corporate headquarters abroad, but it now poses a clear and present danger to valuable and important UK manufacturing jobs?

Kwasi Kwarteng: When the right hon. Gentleman spoke about “the rich men”, I thought he was referring to his friends in Davos, such as the former Prime Minister, who seems to be very focused on trying to reverse the verdict of the 17.4 million people in this country who voted for Brexit.

It is very clear where the interests of Airbus and businesses lie. They have said repeatedly over the past six weeks that they want to back the deal—they want an end to this uncertainty, and they want clarity and the ability to plan for the future. Where does the right hon. Gentleman stand on that?

Fishing Policy

14. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on fishing policy after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): We continue to work closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on our fisheries policy after exit. The fisheries White Paper set out the Government’s plans for a bright future for our fishing industry as we become an independent coastal state. By leaving the common fisheries policy, we will be able to make sure, for the first time in over 40 years, that our fishermen get a fairer deal.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Work has just started on preparing a long-term strategy to revive the East Anglian fishing industry. The foundation stone on which this renaissance will be built is taking back control of access to UK waters. Can the Minister assure the House that this right will not be traded away in any future negotiations, however difficult they may become?

Chris Heaton-Harris: My hon. Friend yet again demonstrates his dedication to help to revive the East Anglian fishing industry. Let me be clear that this deal will mean we become an independent coastal state with control over our waters. We have firmly rejected a link between access to our waters and access to markets. The fisheries agreement is not something that we will be trading off against any other priority.

No-deal Preparation

15. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What recent steps the Government have taken to prepare for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): The Government’s focus continues to be on leaving the EU with a deal. However, with just nine weeks until we leave, the Government are responsibly preparing for the alternative.
Tom Pursglove: What impact does my hon. Friend believe that terminating no-deal preparations now would have on the Prime Minister’s ongoing negotiations with the EU?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for his question—and as someone who worked for me as my parliamentary researcher for five years, I thank him for no sight whatsoever of his supplementary question.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): He’s better.

Chris Heaton-Harris: He is much better; that is absolutely true.

Anybody who has been involved in any type of negotiation—perhaps a union representative trying to negotiate a better deal on employee rights or salaries, or just anyone involved in any sort of deal—knows that they need to have the ultimate option on the table at any given time. Reducing any options basically means that you have less room to negotiate—it would be a foolish thing to do.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The best that the Government seem to be able to say about their deal is that it is very slightly less worse than no deal. That is the metaphorical gun that they are putting against our head, and I would appreciate it if they could give us a decent answer as to why they have nothing better than that.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Lady knows that I have a huge amount of respect for her, but the premise behind her question is so wrong that it is hard to believe. A whole host of employers in her constituency will doubtless have beaten a path to her door to ask her to vote for the certainty and continuity that the Government’s deal delivers. If they have not done so, I would be very surprised, because they are doing it nationally.

Customs Union

16. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of negotiating a permanent customs union between the UK and the EU.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): A customs union would not respect the referendum result. On this side of the House, we are intending to respect that result.

Alex Cunningham: The statutory instrument covering the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—REACH—regulations relating to chemical production on Teesside and elsewhere is inadequate, according to the industry. Surely a comprehensive customs union, which has been described by the director general of the CBI as a “practical real-world answer”, would solve such complex problems.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman might see the approach to this as one of managed decline—

Alex Cunningham: It is.

Stephen Barclay: Well, indeed he does, clearly, so he does not see the rich opportunity of an independent trade policy that backs our businesses to go out in the world and succeed, or the opportunities that they would have through a trade policy. In a way, this really goes to the crux of the issue, because there is a lack of vision among Labour Members. They cannot see the benefits of an independent trade policy, and are therefore willing to contract that opportunity out to the European Union and have no say in it.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Like the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Speithorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), the Secretary of State has no doubt seen the comment by Tom Enders, the chief executive officer of Airbus, that the Government’s handling of Brexit is a “disgrace”. More than 6,000 good-quality jobs in Alyn and Deeside are dependent on Airbus. What share of the blame does the Secretary of State take for this?

Stephen Barclay: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that those are good-quality jobs. We see that in the potential of things such as the ring for the future, the research and development centre at Airbus and the apprenticeship programmes that we see in industries—

Mark Tami: What about now?

Stephen Barclay: The answer to that is, again, to listen to the voice of business. It is clear that business wants an implementation period, not just for the certainty that it would deliver, but because, from a regulatory position, it does not want to have to take two steps and have two changes.

Second EU Referendum

18. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the implications for his Department’s policies of a second referendum on the UK leaving the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): The Government have been clear all along that we will not hold a second referendum. A clear majority of the electorate delivered an instruction to the Government to withdraw from the European Union, with 17.4 million votes cast in that manner.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for his unwavering commitment to that position, which my constituents will be very pleased to hear. A clear majority of people in Redditch—62%—voted to leave. That is nearly 29,000 people who voted to leave in that historic vote. Does he therefore agree that to go back on that vote and on our manifesto commitment would cause massive damage to our democracy?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend—[Interruption.] I hear some murmuring from Labour Members that they refuse to deliver on their manifesto commitments that were made in exactly the same manner. I guess that a fair question to ask those proposing a second referendum: should they not come clean and admit that they are not really after asking the British people, and that they just want to prevent us from leaving the European Union in the first place? That would be a much more honest position for them to take.
Topical Questions

T1. [908769] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Since I last updated the House, the Government have suffered a significant defeat in the meaningful vote, and I think it is right that we recognise that. The Prime Minister has responded to that by listening and engaging—[Laughter] Well, the Leader of the Opposition has not engaged, but the Prime Minister has. She has engaged with the leadership of the party of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and other parties, and today she is engaging with trade union leaders. Yesterday she engaged with the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales. The Government have also responded to some immediate concerns of the House, such as by waiving the settlement fee and responding to the concerns of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) by looking at how we can have more targeted engagement with the House in the next phase of negotiations. We are continuing the process, and we look forward to further discussions.

Mr Carmichael: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. The “Whitehall Monitor 2019” report, which was published on Monday, revealed that the overall number of civil servants is up by 19,900 since the referendum, that the cost of civil servants leaving stands at £74 million a year, and that a third of the entire civil service is now apparently working on Brexit. Despite all that, the Government have passed only five of the 13 Bills necessary for Brexit, and less than a fifth of those, the Government ha ve also responded to some immediate concerns of the House, such as by waiving the settlement fee and responding to the concerns of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) by looking at how we can have more targeted engagement with the House in the next phase of negotiations. We are continuing the process, and we look forward to further discussions.

Stephen Barclay: The right hon. Gentleman will recall from his days as deputy Chief Whip that a range of legislation needs to be passed for various scenarios. Significant progress has been made with the statutory instruments, with over 300 being passed, so he is cherry-picking with his comments about legislation. For example, the Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill passed through this House this week. That key piece of legislation will enable us to make bilateral payments in the event of no deal. Considerable work has been happening over the past two years, and I pay tribute to civil servants across Whitehall for that. Significant progress has been made, but not all the issues relating to no deal are within the Government’s control, because some are reliant upon responses from business, third parties, EU member states and the European Commission.

T2. [908770] Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend has heard the huge concerns from both agriculture and manufacturing about leaving without a deal, but 80% of our economy is services. What impact would leaving without a deal have on not only services within the UK, but our services exports, regarding which we have substantial surpluses with the EU and around the world?

Stephen Barclay: Understandably, we have big debates in the House about goods, but 80% of our economy is services, so my hon. Friend is quite right to draw attention to that. The political declaration contains the opportunity to have a good and constructive relationship that reflects the dominance of the UK position on financial services, for example. That is why the package of the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration together is so important.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): There are 64 days until 29 March, and the deal has gone down. On Monday, the Prime Minister made a statement about what she is going to do now; to put it politely, she was vague about her intentions. She said that she would “take the conclusions” of any discussions with MPs “back to the EU”, as if she is in a parallel universe in which we are somehow at the start of the process. I have a simple question: when the Prime Minister goes to the EU, will she be seeking legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement, simple reassurances or, still less, clarifications?

Stephen Barclay: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is always polite, so I will reciprocate and say that there are 64 days to go but we still do not know what Labour’s position is. It appears—

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): He asked you a different question.

Stephen Barclay: I will come on to that.

If we are talking about parallel universes and the 64 remaining days, it is worth clarifying that I genuinely do not know what the Labour position is. An amendment has been tabled that would change the operation of the House’s Standing Orders without any proper debate about the constitutional implications, which go way beyond Brexit, and extend the article 50 process until December, which would mean that elections to the European Parliament would have to happen in May. Three years after the people asked to leave, is it now Labour party policy to ask the people to vote for Members of the European Parliament? Everyone else is engaging with the process—even Len McCluskey is joining us for discussions in No. 10 today—yet the Leader of the Opposition is sitting alone in a parallel universe, unwilling to engage with anyone. We are listening to the concerns of Members on both sides of the House, including our confidence and supply partners, and we are working constructively to address the concerns of the business community. The question for the shadow Secretary of State—I hope he will clarify this for the House—is about Labour’s policy. Will he confirm that Labour is no longer committed to its manifesto?

Mr Speaker: I always listen to the Secretary of State with the keenest possible interest and attention, but I must say to him in all courtesy that he is filibustering his own right hon. and hon. Friends, who might not get in on this session. It must be clear that he is culpable, because the Chair is not.

Keir Starmer: The Secretary of State gives the definition of a non-answer. [Hons. Members: “What’s your policy, then?”] Our policy is a comprehensive customs union and single market deal—[ Interruption ] It is in our manifesto, and I think that there would be a majority for it in this place, if it were put to a vote.
I look forward to tomorrow’s headlines, but I doubt they will say that Len McCluskey and the Prime Minister have agreed on the way forward. I asked the Secretary of State a question, and I would like, as an answer. Does the Prime Minister intend to put her deal to the House again and, if so, when?

Stephen Barclay: Self-evidently, whatever deal we bring forward will need to secure the confidence of the House, and that will entail a vote. The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about his policy and actually, unlike the Leader of the Opposition, he has been quite clear. His policy appears to be to remain in the European Union by triggering a second referendum, and he has indicated his personal view that, following that vote, we should remain. His policy is not consistent with the Labour manifesto, so I ask him again: is his policy the Labour policy, or is his policy different from that of the Leader of the Opposition?

T4. [908772] Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): In the event of the UK leaving the EU without a deal, will my right hon. Friend consider using the provisions of article XXIV of the general agreement on tariffs and trade to maintain existing arrangements until a free trade agreement can be concluded, and thus avoid any imposition of tariffs or quotas?

Stephen Barclay: As I would expect, my right hon. Friend asks a detailed, precise and interesting question. I have looked into this issue, and paragraph 5 of article XXIV allows only interim arrangements that are necessary for the formulation of a new free trade area where the parties have “a plan and schedule” for doing so. It does not allow the continuation of previous arrangements under an agreement that no longer applies.

T3. [908771] Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): A small business owner from my constituency emailed me before Christmas. His business had won its first EU contract, requiring him to hire four extra people to deliver it. However, he has just been told by the EU that the business will lose the contract in the event of a no-deal Brexit. What would the Secretary of State say to my constituent? Will he please set out what the Government would say to my constituent, rather than what the Opposition would say?

Stephen Barclay: I say to the hon. Lady—this applies to many Opposition Members—that I do not doubt her commitment to the business concerned or to trying to protect jobs. Indeed, that is one of the driving forces that led many Opposition Members to come into politics, but part of that is about listening to what business groups are saying. What they say is that, in the withdrawal agreement, things like citizens’ rights and our security relationships matter. Above all, businesses say that the flow and supply of goods matter, and that not having two sets of regulatory changes matters. That is why the business community says that it wants the certainty of the deal. When the Leader of the Opposition will not even enter into discussions, we are happy to engage with the hon. Lady and others, but this needs a two-way process.

T8. [908776] Gillian Keegán (Chichester) (Con): Extreme weather events have cost the global economy more than half a trillion pounds over the past few years, and the scientific consensus is that, unless we halve our greenhouse gas emissions, such events will only become more frequent. Currently, EU institutions monitor and enforce how we in the UK implement our policies. Can the Minister outline his plans for future regulatory oversight?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The UK wants to continue to be at the forefront of environmental leadership and tackling climate change. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has set out plans for a green Brexit. With the environment Bill, we will make sure that we have the institutions set up to police that and to monitor our progress on protecting our environment.

T6. [908774] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): When I met representatives of Doctors of the World yesterday, they told me that the EU workers on the Government’s new 12-month visa scheme will not qualify for the immigration health surcharge scheme. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that is the case and tell us what provision will be made for those people?

Stephen Barclay: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to remind the House of the £20.5 billion extra that the Government are investing in the NHS. In terms of workforce and recruitment, which is key, I remind him that the Government have lifted the tier 2 visa for doctors and nurses as part of increasing recruitment. What matters is not just recruitment from the EU—we have already had an exchange about EU recruitment since the referendum—but the recruitment of doctors and nurses globally. We are very committed to doing that as part of a skills-based immigration system.

T9. [908777] Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): How much VAT will we no longer pay to the EU after Brexit?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): I honestly cannot give my hon. Friend the exact answer, so I will happily write to him about that. Arrangements will be needed for paying various taxes and tariffs in the event that we leave without a deal, and they are in progress.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is in danger of rivalling the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), but they both believe in healthy competition, after all.

T7. [908775] Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome the fact that EU citizens will no longer have to pay a fee to obtain settled status, but they will still have to make an application, which implies that some may be refused, as has happened already with citizenship. After the shame of the Windrush scandal, does the Minister not think that EU citizens should be guaranteed the right to stay in their own homes?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I humbly suggest to the hon. Lady that that is what UK nationals across Europe, in just about every EU state, do when they reside there. We
have offered a very generous package—more generous than that which the EU is currently offering in return regarding citizens’ rights.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I have been contacted, as I am sure many colleagues have, by UK citizens living in the EU who are concerned about their future voting rights locally after we leave the EU. Will the Minister update the House on the progress that the Department has made on that?

Mr Robin Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is a concern for UK citizens living across the EU. The UK sought to raise the matter in negotiations, but the Commission was clear that that was outside its competence. It agreed to let us take it up bilaterally with member states, which we have done. I am pleased to say that earlier this week, I signed the first reciprocal voting rights treaty with Spain to guarantee the voting rights of UK citizens in Spain, and Spanish citizens in the UK, in local elections.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Many businesses, particularly small ones, have yet to calculate, or do not want to publicise, the impact on them of a no-deal Brexit. Does the Minister recognise the scale of the sense of betrayal at the idea that a Tory Government should use those businesses’ balance sheets, employees and hard-won market expertise as leverage in an act of economic betrayal and blackmail?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, although the premise behind it is completely incorrect. Small businesses across the country are getting ready for a Brexit with a deal and a no-deal Brexit. She gives me the opportunity to highlight the partnership pack that is online for all businesses to look at, so that citizens, individuals and businesses, small and large, can prepare appropriately for a no-deal Brexit. The partnership pack can be found on gov.uk.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In every answer that the Secretary of State and his Ministers have given this morning, they have declined to recognise that they lost the vote on the deal by 230 votes—by more than two to one. Exactly how are the Government going to listen to Members of this House so that we can agree a deal and move forward?

Stephen Barclay: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman came in partway through topical questions, but I opened my response to the first question with a recognition of the result. I have referred in a number of answers to the engagement that the Prime Minister and ministerial colleagues are having. Indeed, in my exchange with the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), I mentioned meetings with trade union leaders today, and I spoke about meeting the SNP First Minister. Listening to the hon. Gentleman’s question, it is almost as though the last hour has not happened. We accept that the result of that vote was significant, and we are listening to the result. We have taken a number of measures as a consequence.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the start of today’s business, the Annunciator was showing that Question Time would be followed by the urgent question, which would then be followed by a Justice statement and the business statement. I understand that that has been corrected during questions, but for the benefit of the House, will you clarify the order of business that will follow?

Mr Speaker: Yes, I am happy to do that, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. After this urgent question, we will have the business question, and after that there will be a ministerial statement on the management and supervision of men convicted of sexual offences. That is the order, so business questions come after this urgent question. I hope that that is helpful to colleagues.
EU Free Trade Agreements

10.40 am

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for International Trade if he will make a statement on maintaining EU free trade agreements after the UK leaves the EU.

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): As a member of the European Union, the UK currently participates in around 40 free trade agreements with more than 70 countries. These free trade agreements cover a wide variety of relationships, including economic partnership agreements with developing nations; association agreements, which cover broader economic and political co-operation; and trade agreements with countries that are closely aligned with the EU, such as Turkey and Switzerland. Of course, more conventional free trade agreements are also part of the package.

Businesses in the UK, EU and partner countries are eligible for a range of preferential market-access opportunities under the terms of the free trade agreements. Those opportunities can include, but are not limited to, preferential duties for goods, including reductions in import tariff rates across a wide variety of products, quotas for reduced or nil payments of payable duties, and quotas for more relaxed rules-of-origin requirements; enhanced market access for service providers; access to public procurement opportunities across a range of sectors; and improved protections for intellectual property.

For continuity and stability for businesses, consumers and investors, we are committed to ensuring that the benefits I have outlined are maintained, providing a smooth transition as we leave the EU. The Department for International Trade, the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development are working with partner countries to prepare to maintain existing trading relationships.

Mr Leslie: With just 64 days to go, will the Minister confirm that not only is there the well-known Brexit risk of catastrophic disruption to 44% of our country’s trade, but now, on top of that, a further 12% of our trade could be thrown into chaos because of the Government’s failure to roll over our 40 trade agreements with 70 countries around the rest of the world in time for exit day?

Does the Minister recall the promise made by his Secretary of State at his party conference in October 2017, when he boasted:

“I hear people saying, ‘Oh, we won’t have any’”

free trade agreements

“before we leave.’ Well, believe me, we’ll have up to 40 ready for one second after midnight in March 2019”?

Was that bragging not made worse when the former trade Minister Lord Price tweeted falsely in October 2017:

“All have agreed roll over”?

Will the Minister explain why expectations were raised so high back then, when today’s reality is so dangerously disappointing? Can he confirm that the leaked memo reported in the Financial Times was accurate, and that he has been warned by his officials that most of the deals Britain is covered by will lapse because there is no transition period to keep Britain under the EU umbrella once Brexit occurs? Does he agree with the Government official quoted in the FT that

“Almost none of them are ready to go now”?

As well as the 40 free trade agreements, there are more than 700 other trade-related treaties and mutual recognition agreements, so when will we get an accurate update from the Government on how many of those will lapse in March as well? Some 2% of our trade is via the European economic area free trade agreement, with Norway and Iceland, which has still not been settled for roll-over; Canada accounts for 1.4% of our trade; Turkey, with which we currently have a form of customs union, accounts for 1.3%; South Korea accounts for 1%; and Switzerland accounts for 3.1%. All these and more add up to £151 billion of export and import markets. Will the Minister confirm that if we do not roll over the trade arrangements we enjoy by virtue of our EU membership, the full range of World Trade Organisation tariffs will start to apply?

What is the real situation in respect of Australia and New Zealand? Are the press claims that a full free trade agreement has been signed accurate, or are these just mutual recognition agreements being passed off as FTAs? On Switzerland, can the Minister place full details of the allegedly initialled agreement in the Library of the House? It is still not clear which aspects of the existing UK-Swiss relationship are due to be replicated. Will UK-based firms continue trading into Switzerland on exactly the same basis, including the free movement of people, or are there differences? For example, can he rule out tariffs on imported Swiss goods from March?

If British cars are exported, could they face 10% WTO tariffs? What will the tariffs be on Norwegian salmon, Canadian maple syrup, and food and veg from Turkey? When will the Government start telling Parliament about these things? Is it not the truth that all these countries first want to know what the UK’s relationship will be with our largest trading partner, the EU, and that we have little hope of pinning down brand new agreements until we have pinned down that agreement? Will the Minister face reality, say these fantasy unicorn promises, and admit that Brexit is not going well and presents a clear and present danger to the free trade agreements our economy desperately relies on?

George Hollingbery: That was a pretty long shopping list, and I am not in a position to answer all the hon. Gentleman’s questions, but I will make one point. I told him in Committee back in November that there was a wide range of reasons why some of these agreements had been challenging in many instances. For example, there have been changing incentives. If this House cannot make up its mind on what Brexit looks like, it will obviously be difficult for some of our interlocutors to decide whether we will be leaving the EU on 29 March. That said, a responsible Government make plans for any eventuality, and we are working extremely hard to make sure that the 40 agreements we have in place are available to those companies that use the preferences they guarantee.

I told the hon. Gentleman earlier that I believed the majority of these agreements would be in place by 29 March, and I continue to believe that, but it would not be appropriate to go into further details on an individual country basis, because these conversations are necessarily
confidential, and our partners wish them to be confidential. To go into them, therefore, would not be proper. I am very happy to tell the House, however, that I believe we will have the majority of agreements rolled over, and it is absolutely our objective to have them all rolled over.

Finally, one small detail worth clearing up—it has been a matter of some press speculation—is that the Swiss agreement does not include any provisions on free movement.

George Hollingbery: The Minister at least pays obeisance to, and I think has genuine respect for, etiquette, protocol and the principle of parliamentary courtesy, so it would not occur to him for a moment to descend into the swamp, disregard his ministerial responsibility to the House, and start prating on about the policy of the Opposition, but let us put it to the test and hear from the Minister.

Mr Speaker: The Minister at least pays obeisance to, and I think has genuine respect for, etiquette, protocol and the principle of parliamentary courtesy, so it would not occur to him for a moment to descend into the swamp, disregard his ministerial responsibility to the House, and start prating on about the policy of the Opposition, but let us put it to the test and hear from the Minister.

George Hollingbery: First, let me pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) for all the work that he did in preparing this country for striking new trade deals, and indeed in maintaining the continuity of our existing free trade deals. He points out an inconsistency in the Opposition’s position on this matter. I agree with him that it is a fairly pointed one, and ask them to contemplate a bit. Yes, he is correct in his assessment.

Mr Speaker: The tiger that was previously in the library has now been removed, and the immediate danger has been averted. I think the Minister will be familiar with the Merchant Ivory film in which that exchange occurs. [Interruption.] It is fairly obvious, if one applies one’s mind to it.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) asked a very simple and sensible question. The Minister’s long and rambling answer had a simple summary—clearly, it was no. The Secretary of State repeatedly told us that it was a simple matter to roll over deals on trade with approximately 70 countries, which constitutes 13% of our exports and 12% of our imports—it would be a cut-and-paste job. The Government would be ready on day one after Brexit, he told us. That was never true, was it? Those deals are entirely separate and independent from any deal that we may have with the EU.

If we leave with no deal, can the Minister confirm that these arrangements with third-party countries will fall away, as we have consistently warned? Will he confirm that, without new agreements in place, we could, in the absence of a deal with the EU, have no basis of trade with these countries after 29 March, and would fall back on World Trade Organisation rules? That is an argument for taking no deal off the table if ever there was one.

Will the Minister confirm that many of the terms of those agreements will need to be amended, and could be changed substantively as countries seek to improve on the terms that they have with the EU? Will he also confirm that agreements with countries that have economic partnership agreements are often regarded as being not fit for purpose and are alleged to have been signed under economic duress? The Minister will do well to listen to some of this, as this is the reality of what is going on in his Department. For example, North African countries want to sell their oranges and olive oil to us in far greater quantities than is allowed by the EPAs with the EU, which protect southern European producers.

In the Trade Bill debate in the Lords yesterday, the Minister conceded that the Department had no idea how many countries were ready to roll over their free trade agreements, how many would not, how many would have to adjust their constitutional arrangements, and how long that might take. Will the Minister for Trade Policy confirm that his colleague was right to say so? The Secretary of State is busy socialising in Davos. Is that not a reminder of the incompetence and overconfidence that he has shown over the past two and a half years?

George Hollingbery: The hon. Gentleman opened his question by expressing his view that I had given a long and rambling answer. I am pretty confident that the question was longer and more rambling than my previous answer.

Will there be no basis of trade if we fall out without an agreement? No. There will continue to be the basis of trade that exists for everybody, which is the World Trade Organisation. [Interruption.] Indeed, I do confirm that. That is why we are putting such an enormous amount of effort into transitioning these agreements. Will the terms be amended? Yes; plainly, the bilateral partners with whom we are negotiating have different motivations. That is something that I have made very clear to members of the International Trade Committee when I have talked to them. That has led to some extension of the discussions that we are having, but many of those discussions are going extremely well. I reiterate to the House that I am confident that the majority of these trade arrangements will be put in place by the time we leave the European Union.

The hon. Gentleman also treated us to his analysis of EPAs, saying that they were not fit for purpose. He gave us the example of oranges. The last time I stood opposite him in a debate, he gave us the example of the difficulty that EPAs cause Ghana and its chicken, and indeed Tanzania and its fish. On the Ghana agreement, the fact is—I remember this—that chicken had been completely excluded from the EPA. The point about Tanzania and fish is not entirely relevant to EPAs, as there is no EPA with Tanzania.
Mr Speaker: Order. A question has been asked. The Minister is an unfailingly courteous fellow, and we must hear his answer.

George Hollingbery: I want to be absolutely clear with the House that although it is possible to interpret my last answer as meaning that there has been absolutely no progress on the agreements, that would be entirely, completely and utterly unfair interpretation of where we find ourselves. There are agreements that have had initialling; there are agreements that are very close to having initialling; and there are many very agreements that we believe will have a signature at the appropriate time. There is not an agreement that has had a formal signature yet, but to focus only on that is to misunderstand, or at least misinterpret, how these agreements work. I have said to the House that we believe that we will transition the majority of the agreements by exit day, which necessarily means that they will have a signature, and I have every confidence that they will.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): To put this into perspective, is it not right that just five countries—Switzerland, Canada, Korea, Norway and Turkey—account for three quarters of UK exports to the 70 countries that the Minister mentioned? Does he agree that it is just a little tiresome that the Opposition are always revelling in highlighting problems and it might be more constructive if they wanted rather to help to work on some of the solutions?

George Hollingbery: My hon. Friend is correct in his analysis of the scale of these deals, and of course we are putting the most resource into the deals of the largest size. However, I want the House to be clear that we are also signatories to a great many development agreements—EPAs. While those agreements may not be of the greatest importance to the UK economically, they are enormously important to the participant countries with whom we have signed them, and we are putting effort into making sure that they are also transitioned.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I think that people outside this place listening to the Minister’s remarks will be troubled to hear him refer to a “shopping list” of countries. Many people’s livelihoods in this country rely on those countries. People will also be very concerned to hear that he has not today committed to honouring the promise that was previously made on each of these 40 trade agreements. Will he now confirm to the House that he will not be able to honour the promise of every single one being signed by exit day?

George Hollingbery: I am sorry that this is slightly like “Groundhog Day”, Mr Speaker, but I will repeat what I have said before. We are confident that we will roll over a majority of these agreements. We are working to try to ensure that they are all rolled over by exit day. There are clear indications that in some cases that is going to be challenging. Let me be absolutely clear: if I used the term, “shopping list”, and that was deemed in any way pejorative about any of these important deals, I wish to withdraw and rephrase it. It was simply shorthand...
for saying that there are a great many of them and they are all important to us. As I just said, EPAs are as important to us as the largest deals, simply because we understand that we have a role in the world in development and understand the importance of these deals to those countries. We also understand the number of jobs and businesses that rely on these preferences. That is another reason why we are so keen to get as many of the transition deals across as we can.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Shopping lists are actually quite important, as are people’s livelihoods. Is it not the case that these 40 roll-over countries represent just 12% of our trade? Can I tell the Minister that we are the biggest nation in Europe, and second in the world only to China and the United States, for investment, and we are the largest export market in the world for German cars and for French agriculture? Unlike remainers, who tend to be rather pessimistic sorts, I and most people are very optimistic about our future outside the European Union.

George Hollingbery: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. It is interesting to observe, and the House should understand, that a good proportion—I do not have the exact number in my head—of the 12% of trade that is represented by the countries with which the European Union has existing free trade deals is not carried out under preferences in any event because the particular lines in which they trade are not covered by the agreements, so the figure is actually quite a lot less.

[Interjection.] The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) says from a sedentary position, “So it’s all just fine.” No, of course that is not the case. I have tried to make the point again and again that we regard this as extremely important.

On my hon. Friend’s reference to inward investment, Deloitte recently pointed out that the UK is the leading location in Europe for foreign direct investment. In the three years from 2015 to 2017, we enjoyed £140 billion-worth of direct investment from overseas—more than France, at £44 billion, and Germany, at £50 billion, combined.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): What is the Minister’s definition of the term, “majority”, which he has used several times? Does he mean 21 out of 40 or 39 out of 40?

George Hollingbery: Perhaps I am being stupid, but I do not really understand the last part of the question. A majority is more than half; we can be clear about that. I do not think I have anything more to add.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): We now know that we will not have 40 of these deals ready to roll over on the stroke of midnight. Some of these deals will be worth proportionately more than others, so it could be said that we have a majority ready to go, but they might be ones of very low value. Can the Minister give us more clarity about the most valuable of these trade deals?

George Hollingbery: I can report to the House that we are making good progress on a whole range of these deals, including those of high value and those at the other end of the scale.
he had a very positive reaction. He met with the Peruvians and the Colombians, and he further met with the South Korean Government. Today he will meet with the Ecuadorian Government, the Canadian Government and the South African Government, and later today—

[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman pretends to be playing a violin; I suppose he is saying that it is a sob story.

Mr Sheerman: I’m fiddling while Rome burns!

George Hollingbery: What I am trying to tell the hon. Gentleman is that the Secretary of State is in Davos doing exactly what this House would want him to do. He is at the negotiating coalface, ensuring that our partners in these countries who have not necessarily taken a no-deal Brexit seriously do so. He is incentivising them to sit down around the negotiating table, and he is making good progress. Later this afternoon, he will attend the trade stewards committee, where he will meet nearly every single trade Minister in nearly every single jurisdiction where we are attempting to create continuity in our trade agreements. I hope the hon. Gentleman will withdraw his implication that the Secretary of State is not doing his job, because that is exactly what he is doing.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): There is a deal on the table that the Government have negotiated with the EU, and it provides a transition period that would provide certainty for all these trade agreements to be completed in time for our exit. It is my understanding, although I have not checked his voting record, that the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), who has posed this urgent question, voted against that deal.

Mr Leslie: Which one?

Rachel Maclean: The meaningful vote.

Mr Leslie: indicated assent.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman voted against having a transition agreement because he voted against the deal. Does the Minister agree that it might be better for the hon. Gentleman to pose his urgent question to the leader of his own party and ask him why he did not engage in talks with the Prime Minister to get through the deal that would provide certainty for our businesses?

George Hollingbery: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and as we have already discussed, there is plainly some very real inconsistency in the Opposition position. I point out to my hon. Friend that the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) is a champion of free trade and actually spoke in this House in the debates on the EU-Japan EPA and CETA back in June, when I have to say he voted with the Government and, indeed, for the deals in that case, unlike his Front Benchers.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Businesses, including one in my constituency, are already moving operations to mainland Europe because of doubts about whether they will have market access to places such as South Korea. There are hints that we will focus on the higher value trade agreements and at least get them in place come Brexit day. However, if an SME’s trade is with one of the smaller countries, that is every bit as important for it and for the people it employs as the trade deal with South Korea. We need all 40 in place, and the Minister did assure us that that would happen. Has he not completely let down those people?

George Hollingbery: We have staff in post in all the markets where we are attempting to transition these deals. An enormous amount of internal resource has been applied to what we in the Department call TAC—trade agreement continuity. Indeed, we have taken resource out of parts of the other workstreams we do to concentrate on exactly this issue. We have been negotiating on all these agreements, not just the larger ones. There is of course a financial incentive to concentrate on the larger ones, for the sake of our own businesses and for the sake of employees and families who want to put food on their table. At the same time, however, there are small businesses, as I know perfectly well, that trade under the preferences enjoyed through EPAs. There are also developmental reasons why we want to continue those arrangements, because it is the right thing to do, and the hon. Lady may be reassured that we are putting effort into all these agreements.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I must say that I welcome the work the Secretary of State is doing out in Davos to push forward the UK’s trade policy. His work is certainly far more welcome than the pontification of the former Member for Sedgefield there. To put these deals into perspective, will the Minister confirm that the Swiss trade deal on its own is worth 21% of the value of all trade done under these 40 agreements?

George Hollingbery: Indeed, I can: that is the correct figure. There are two or three other agreements that will add substantially to that if we manage to transition them, and I am very hopeful that we shall be able to do so.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The Minister waxes lyrical about foreign inward investment into the UK. May I remind him that, in north Wales alone, we have had two devastating announcements in the past seven days? Last week, Hitachi said that it is pulling out of Wylfa Newydd, a £16 billion project in north-west Wales, and today, Tom Enders, the CEO of Airbus International, said that it will pull out of the UK, including out of its Airbus factory in north-east Wales, if there is a no-deal Brexit. What type of message does it send out to current and future international trading partners and investors when the UK Government cannot successfully engage with some of the most successful businesses in the world?

George Hollingbery: It is a complex web we weave, and there are clearly incentives in many different directions for many different companies. I have every sympathy with workers in Wales and others who find their jobs threatened by the decisions that companies make. The UK Government continue to engage with those companies, and to try to mitigate any moves they may make. We engage widely through POST with the parent companies of many of those organisations, and we are doing everything we can to ensure that foreign direct investment continues in the UK. Indeed, the United Nations Conference
on Trade and Development announced a week or two ago that the UK remains Europe’s primary choice for foreign direct investment.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): For the avoidance of doubt, will my hon. Friend confirm at what point we will be able to sign our own independent free-trade agreements with countries around the world?

George Hollingbery: The withdrawal agreement and political declaration are clear: we will be able to negotiate with third-party countries once we have gone through the process of withdrawal and after Brexit day, but we will not be able to sign and implement those agreements until the end of the implementation period.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Some 24 countries have lodged their opposition to the schedules on goods and services that we have placed with the World Trade Organisation. Does that indicate how complex it is to deal under WTO rules, and was it always misleading to suggest that it would be easy to have 40 trade deals ready on the day we leave the European Union?

George Hollingbery: There are, give or take, some 165 members of the World Trade Organisation, and if 24 object to new schedules laid by a new partner, that is a relatively small number and there is a well-understood formal process through which those objections will be dealt with. Most objections are on the basis of loss of privilege through the existing relationship with the EU—and therefore access to the UK—being changed, and such things are not unusual. Indeed, the EU operated on uncertified WTO schedules from 1995 until the present.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Minister tries to reassure us by saying that a majority of these deals will rollover on Brexit day, but that is as reassuring as knowing that the majority of my constituents will not lose their jobs, or that a majority of businesses in my constituency will not shut down. For every deal that stops on 29 March, a business or businesses somewhere in these islands will suffer, and each deal that does not continue in its entirety after Brexit means that businesses lose money and go bust, and people lose their jobs. Is that the cost of this chaotic Brexit?

George Hollingbery: Nobody wants any family to be affected or anybody to lose their job as a result of us not being able to transition these free-trade deals, and that is why we are making every possible effort to ensure that all deals are transitioned. I have explained to the House why, in some cases, that is extremely difficult, but the Department is ensuring that every effort goes into ensuring as few adverse consequences as possible, and I am confident that the majority of the deals will be passed. It would help to ensure smooth continuity if Opposition parties were not so resolute in trying to vote down the Trade Bill.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Previously, the Secretary of State said that he would robustly defend the UK steel industry, yet a bombshell report today says that only half the steel bought by the UK Government comes from Britain. What is the Department doing for the UK steel industry, given that there is insufficient support from the Government at home?

George Hollingbery: The Department for International Trade will be responsible for the Trade Remedies Authority, when established. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the principal job of the TRA will be to ensure a level playing field internationally for products where there is potential for unfair international competition, as there is from several source countries. We are clear that the TRA must be in place as soon as possible, and as I said previously, it is not helpful for the terms of the Trade Bill to be blocked by all sorts of manoeuvres in both Houses. The Bill will allow us to establish the TRA, which will produce a robust defence of our industries, and particularly those that are most vulnerable, such as steel. I encourage him and his colleagues who represent areas of steel manufacturing, or indeed car manufacturing and ceramics, to get behind the Bill and put the TRA on a statutory footing, as it is there to help exactly those industries.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that the EU has 36 other free trade agreements with non-EU countries, coupled with the £40 billion divorce settlement we look set to pay, could the Minister outline why he believes that we will not have access to those free trade agreements, other than some of the bitterness we have heard in this Chamber today, and how does the Minister intend to turn this bitter lemon into sugar-free lemonade?

George Hollingbery: I will be completely straight with you, Mr Speaker: I am not entirely sure that I totally understand the hon. Gentleman’s question, but I shall give it a go. There are a number of agreements that are negotiated exclusively between the European Union and third-party countries. Those are between the European Union and those countries, and we will not be a member of the European Union, and therefore will not be able to benefit from their preferences. The whole point of the trade agreement continuity programme is to transition those into a UK-only form, such that we can continue to benefit from those preferences.
Business of the House

11.20 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):
The business for next week will be:

Monday 28 January—Second Reading of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, followed by a debate on a motion relating to proxy voting.


Wednesday 30 January—Remaining stages of the Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Bill [Lords].

Thursday 31 January—Debate on a motion relating to settling the debt owed to victims of the Equitable Life scandal, followed by a debate on a motion relating to the sustainability of maintained nursery schools. The subjects for both debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 1 February: The House will not be sitting.

Sunday will mark Holocaust Memorial Day—an opportunity to remember the 6 million Jews murdered in the holocaust, and the millions of Roma, Gypsies, disabled people, political prisoners, homosexuals and others murdered under Nazi persecution, just for being who they were. We also remember and mourn all those murdered in genocides around the world.

We should also pay tribute to the wonderful work of the Holocaust Educational Trust, which enables 100,000 people every year to hear a survivor’s testimony. The trust has taken more than 38,000 people to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau as part of its holocaust education programme.

Colleagues will recall that the independent complaints and grievance policy, which was established last summer, was to be reviewed after six months. I am pleased to inform the House that an independent reviewer has been identified by the Clerks, and we expect the six-month review to start next week, following final sign-off by the House of Commons Commission on Monday 28 January.

Finally, I wish everyone enjoying haggis, neeps and tatties and a wee dram of whisky tomorrow a very enjoyable Burns night, in celebration of the life and legacy of the great Scottish poet.

11.22 am

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business for next week. I note that there is no Opposition day debate, but I am pleased that she mentioned proxy voting. Mr Speaker, I think you and the Leader of the Opposition have signed the certificate to ensure that proxy voting can take place as soon as possible, and I hope that leaders of the other parties will also sign those certificates as soon as possible.

Can the Leader of the House confirm that the House will rise on 14 February and return on the 24th? I ask that because the Foreign Affairs Committee has actually cancelled a visit to India during that time, and I understand that builders working on restoration and renewal have been told that they will not be able to carry out their planned programme of work. Could we also have the May recess dates?

Can the Leader of the House confirm that Parliament will not be prorogued? There are some noises off to suggest that that might happen. I know that the former Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has got a new job; we know that he has access to heavy machinery, but I hope that is not what the Prime Minister meant by chaos and threats to “social cohesion”.

In her statement on Monday, the Prime Minister did not say whether her deal would be brought back to Parliament, but the Prime Minister’s spokesperson made it clear that the vote that is due to be held on 29 January is not the second meaningful vote. Is it the Government’s intention to bring back a second meaningful vote to the House? I do not know when the Leader of the House intends to lay the business motion for the debate next Tuesday, but will she ensure that it will be a full day’s debate in protected time? Also, when will the votes be expected?

We need to pass an approval resolution and the EU withdrawal agreement Bill, which obviously has not yet been introduced, before 29 March. The Leader of the House might not be able to tell us today, but will she come back next week to say whether that will be scheduled before 29 March, which it needs to be?

Last week, I raised the issue of the size of statutory instruments. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) and other MPs co-signed a letter to the Chief Whip, because their constituencies will be affected by an SI tabled to replace the REACH regulation—I will set this out because it is important—on the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals. Right hon. and hon. Members have met industry representatives, who have serious concerns about the legislation and the effects that it might have on the chemical industry. Those industries are staying in the UK, so it is important for all Members to have a chance to debate that. Will the Leader of the House ensure that that statutory instrument is brought to the Floor of House for debate and proper scrutiny?

Many hon. Members have been to see the Prime Minister. The Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee said—yes, I am going to say it again—that the Prime Minister’s door was open but her mind was closed. However, did anyone check whether she was wearing headphones? Perhaps she was listening to the Everly Brothers, “Problems”, or Chumbawamba, “Tubthumping”. As it is Neil Diamond’s birthday today, perhaps she was listening to “Everybody’s talkin’ at me”, or all the greatest hits of MP4.

I was going to describe the situation as chaotic, but I suppose “confused” and “reckless” are better words. The Secretary of State for International Trade admitted that preparations for a no-deal Brexit, by falling back on World Trade Organisation rules, are impossible unless the Trade Bill passes through Parliament. I heard the very able Minister, the hon. Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery), say just now that the House of Lords has blocked the Bill: it has not. The Lords found that the Trade Bill gives wide powers to Ministers, does not include Parliament or the devolved Administrations, and has no process for making international trade agreements. When will the Government publish the White Paper to set out their policy and proposals for making such agreements?

That is chaos and confusion on the EU, but there is also some domestic confusion. The Prime Minister said that employment in the west midlands has gone up but,
in fact, unemployment has gone up. The west midlands is the only region to show a fall in employment. It is important to get statistics and facts right in the House.

Will the Leader of the House clarify policy, because the Government have been saying different things? Parliament passed the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 with an amendment on public registers. The Act said that such registers would be introduced by 2020 if the overseas territories had not done so voluntarily, and yet a Minister has said that the Government will have “a requirement for an operational public register by 2023”.

That is three years later than the House agreed and five years after Parliament voted to take action on the issue. Will she clarify that?

What are the Government doing about leveraged debts? The Bank of England has raised a red flag over that new breed of sub-prime loans. Ten years on from the financial crash, banks are doling out those risky loans to indebted companies. May we have an urgent statement from the Chancellor on leveraged debts before it is too late?

Our much admired and efficient justice system is in meltdown, causing the Attorney General to say that the Crown Prosecution Service cannot take any more cuts.

I join the Leader of the House in celebrating—if that is the correct word—or remembering Holocaust Memorial Day. We think of all the survivors and remember that the EU was born from that—people wanted peace. Let us remember the resilience of the survivors, who have lived without hate throughout their lives.

I, too, of course will celebrate Burns night tomorrow. I thought that alcohol was banned on the premises, but still I am happy to have a dram of whisky. Last year, there was delicious haggis in the Terrace café. It is on the menu tomorrow, and I encourage all hon. Members to have a go. I hope that our talented chefs will also give us a vegan option.

Andrea Leadsom: A vegan haggis would be an interesting thing to try. Haggis is certainly a delicious meal, and I join the hon. Lady in encouraging all Members to give it a go.

The hon. Lady asked about the proxy voting certificate. I can tell her that it will be in the Prime Minister’s box this evening. I am grateful for the speed with which Clerks and Mr Speaker’s Office have been able to deal with the matter, and I look forward to our ensuring that proxy voting can take place next week.

I announced in October that “subject to the progress of business, the House will rise...on Thursday 14 February and return on Monday 25 February”—[Official Report, 18 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 800.]

That remains the position, but, as the hon. Lady will know, it is for the House to agree recess dates. I will of course come back to the House with proposed May recess dates as soon as I am able to do so.

The hon. Lady asked whether there would be a second meaningful vote. She will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister explained the current situation and next steps in her written statement on Monday, but I can tell her that this morning we tabled a further statement under section 13(11)(a) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, and have consequently tabled a joint motion in accordance with the procedure allowed under section 13(1)(b). That means that Tuesday’s debate will be on a motion relating to both the statement tabled on Monday under section 13(4) and the statement tabled today under section 13(11)(a). We will seek the House’s agreement to a full day’s debate, and the House will then give its preferred options. The Government will of course listen carefully, and next steps will be set out in due course.

The hon. Lady asked about the EU withdrawal agreement Bill. As she will know, it cannot be introduced until the House has approved its introduction in a meaningful vote, or in accordance with future next steps as agreed by the House. She asked about Brexit statutory instruments, and, in particular, asked for the statutory instrument on REACH to be dealt with on the Floor of the House. It is a parliamentary convention that when a reasonable request for a debate has been made, time should be allowed for that debate. However, as the hon. Lady knows, it is expected that in addition to raising the matter during business questions, Opposition Members should outline what they are requesting from the Government through the usual channels.

The hon. Lady asked about employment figures. I am sure that she, and indeed all Members, will be delighted to know that more people are employed than ever before, that the unemployment rate is the lowest that it has been since the 1970s, and that well over 3 million more people are employed now than in 2010. That is good news for people who will have more opportunities to provide for their families, which is absolutely vital.

The hon. Lady asked about the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. I should be grateful if she would write to me about that, so that I can respond to her directly. She also asked about Bank of England lending limits. I suggest that she should raise that issue during Treasury questions on 29 January.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the sentencing rules relating to convictions for dangerous driving? A judge in Bradford recently jailed a man whom he described as a “complete menace” on the roads for dangerous driving, driving while disqualified, failing to provide a specimen, driving while uninsured, and possession of a small bag of cocaine. The man had 18 previous convictions for 33 offences. The judge complained about the fact that he was only able to sentence this individual to a maximum of two years in prison. He said that he would have sentenced him to four years if the law had allowed it, and urged Parliament to address the issue. Dangerous driving is a massive problem in the Bradford district. Will a Minister come to the House to explain what the Government will do to give judges the power that they need to take these menaces off the roads and put them in prison, where they belong?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. Dangerous driving has appalling consequences for far too many people across the country. Questions to the Attorney General will take place next Thursday, 31 January, and it would be appropriate for my hon. Friend to raise the issue then.
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, and may I thoroughly share her comments on Holocaust Memorial Day?

It is, of course, Burns night tomorrow, Mr Speaker, and we know how much you like your haggis. We can never forget the unforgettable Selkirk Grace that you gave at an SNP Burns supper a couple of years ago. Burns summed up Brexit perfectly when he said:

“The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men
Gang aft a-gley,
An’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain,
For promis’d joy!”

For those of my colleagues unschooled in 18th century Scots, “aft a-gley” means “gone to pot,” and nothing can better sum up this self-defeating, isolating, ugly disaster than Burns’ profound words.

On Tuesday we have the joys of Brexit amendment day. The selection of the amendments will be a matter exclusively for you, Mr Speaker, but I am sure the Leader of the House will want to confirm that it will be the Government’s sole objective to facilitate the will of the House on Tuesday: no tricks, no attempts to defy the will of the House, and all that will happen is that the Executive arm of this Parliament will be defeated once again.

Many people are under the misapprehension that Tuesday might mark the end of this nightmare, but unfortunately, of course, that is not the case. There is still to be “meaningful vote 2”—meaningful vote from beyond the grave on whatever form of a dead deal is brought back and resuscitated. So can the Leader of the House explain a little more and say what the process will be beyond Tuesday, and is there any truth in some of the rumours today that the Government now intend to drop the backstop entirely to get this through? I am sure it will delight the rest of the European Union if that is indeed the case.

Will the Leader of the House please confirm that we will be having our February recess? It was suggested—by, I think, Government Whips—that it would be withdrawn as some sort of punishment to a recalcitrant House for not agreeing their Brexit plan, and we would be delighted if that is no longer the case.

With the sheer numbers of all this Brexit delegated legislation there are not enough Members to facilitate that and serve on some of the Committees. Will the Leader of the House have a look at some of the arrangements for these DLs and see if more can be done to bundle them together to ensure that we have enough Members to serve on the Committees? As always, Mr Speaker, best laid plans, best laid plans.

Andrea Leadsom: I was going to perhaps borrow that quote from Robbie Burns myself, but what I will say back to the hon. Gentleman is:

“Hope springs exulting on triumphant wing”.

That was perhaps not said with the superbness of the hon. Gentleman’s accent, but we all love the poetry of Robbie Burns and I am grateful to him for raising it in this place.

The hon. Gentleman asked a series of questions about the next steps for next week. We will take a decision on the next steps following Tuesday’s debate. It is very important that we see what the House wishes to bring forward for discussion. Any keen readers of the excellent reports produced by the Committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) will be well aware that when a motion is agreed to, with or without amendment, it becomes either an order or a resolution of the House. Using the words of the Clerk of the House to that Committee:

“an order is when the House orders one of its officers or sometimes...itself to do certain things that are within its ambit of power...A resolution is an expression of the House’s views”

on a particular issue. It is very important to understand the ramifications of Tuesday’s debate and I hope that that clears things up for the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Prime Minister’s deal will be revived, and I can say to him that while the negotiations with the EU have yielded an agreement, that agreement has not yet been agreed by Parliament, so our focus continues to be on what is needed to secure the support of this House in favour of a deal with the EU. The Prime Minister has spent the past week listening to colleagues from across Parliament from different parties and with different views, and she will continue to do so.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about Brexit statutory instruments and the capacity of the House to deal with them. He will be aware that over 300 Brexit SIs have been laid now. There are potentially up to 600 of them. That figure moves, as I have explained in this House a number of times; clarifications on policy issues and so on mean it is impossible to set out exactly how many SIs there will need to be in total, but we are confident that there will be enough time to pass all of those Brexit SIs that need to be passed by the date of leaving the European Union.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the future for animal welfare after we leave the European Union? Our standards of animal welfare in this country are second to none, and it would be good if we could spread that message throughout the world so that Japan stopped killing whales, Lithuania stopped breeding animals for their fur and 25 million songbirds were no longer netted and eaten throughout the Mediterranean.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a matter that is of huge interest to many Members on both sides of the House. The Government have been clear that leaving the EU will not lead to a lowering of our high animal welfare standards. The UK already has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, and we are looking at what more we can do in the context of our future agriculture policy. He is also right to raise the issue of what more we can do around the world to encourage others to take the same or a similar attitude to our own preference for high animal welfare standards.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the two debates next Thursday, on the Equitable Life scandal and on the sustainability of our nursery schools. I should also like to express my gratitude to her for announcing that the recess due to start on 14 February—Valentine’s day—will go ahead. That is very welcome,
and it just goes to show that romance is not dead. May I also suggest that if Members want to put in to the Backbench Business Committee for debates on departmental estimates, they do so by Friday 8 February? They should not wait “till a’ the seas gang dry, my dear, and the rocks melt wi’ the sun”. They should get their requests in by 8 February.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his update to the House. As ever, I will facilitate Back-Bench business whenever I can.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Will the Leader of the House clarify the situation in relation to Friday sitting days? Obviously, many Members had expected this Friday to be a sitting day, and my Creditworthiness Assessment Bill was on the list of many private Members’ Bills that could have been debated. It would be helpful to MPs, and to the campaigners who use these Bills and want to see them progress through the House, to hear a bit more about when we can get them debated, as they are an important part of the business of the House and clarification would be worth while.

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that my right hon. Friend has raised this issue, and I absolutely share her enthusiasm for the importance of legislation being brought forward by a number of private Members’ Bills. Examples are the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, the Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Act 2018 and the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Act 2018, which have already received Royal Assent and will make a significant difference to people’s lives in our country. It is important that we continue to make progress with private Members’ Bills. There have been conversations in the usual channels, and my right hon. Friend will appreciate that, given that amendments had been tabled to yesterday’s motion, we had to take the decision not to move it so that further discussions could take place to ensure that all Members are given an equal opportunity to bring forward their own important private Members’ resolutions. We believe that consensus can be found, and I expect a further motion to be brought forward next week.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House be able to secure time for a debate on knife crime and the public policy responses to it? This is a big issue not only in London but in many of our cities, including Nottingham, and many people are facing challenges in the community. This is not just about the need for tougher sentencing for possession of a knife without just cause; I would also ask her to convey to Local Government Ministers that Nottingham’s bid to the troubled families programme for diversionary activity support to help to reduce exclusions from schools is part of the prevention package that we need.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this incredibly concerning issue. Across the House, we are all worried about the increase in the use of knives as the weapon of choice in lots of gang problems and in the appalling attacks that we have seen in recent days and months. I commend him for raising the matter. He will be aware that there is a three-hour debate on knife crime in Westminster Hall this afternoon, which he might well wish to take part in, but I can also assure him that the Government’s serious violence strategy, our Offensive Weapons Bill and our many investments in community schemes to encourage young people away from this appalling activity are top priorities for us.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The political and economic crisis in Venezuela means that 90% of its citizens are living in poverty. The Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Foreign Secretary met Venezuelan diplomats yesterday, but I understand that they did not discuss the crisis. May we have a debate in Government time to demonstrate that the Government are taking seriously their responsibility to ensure that we undertake soft-power relations across the world?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. We have seen an appalling economic crisis in Venezuela, and the Foreign Office is carefully following the situation. Juan Guaidó has widespread support among Venezuelans, and the political crisis has gone on long enough. We want a way forward that leads to a peaceful solution for all Venezuelans, and I encourage my hon. Friend perhaps to seek a Westminster Hall debate, so that all hon. Members can discuss their views.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): At this time of year, I always feel a bit envious of the Scottish poet and, as chair of the John Clare Trust, I wish that we could have John Clare suppers all over the country to celebrate the greatest English poet of the countryside.

On a more sombre note, has the Leader of the House seen the recent evidence about the quality of air that our children are breathing in? Not just in London, but up and down the country, all of us, including pregnant women and even people rowing on rivers, are absorbing high levels of poisonous atmospheric content, and it is causing real health problems. Is it not about time that we had real measures to clean up the filthy atmosphere that our children and our people are breathing in?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. This Government are committed to doing everything we can to try to improve the quality of our air. He may be pleased to know that the World Health Organisation has praised our clean air strategy as an example for the rest of the world to follow, with particular regard to our tackling of a range of issues, such as domestic stoves, open fires and so on. He will be aware that we are making available a significant £3.5 billion fund to reduce harmful emissions from road transport, including big investments in cycling and walking, supporting the uptake of ultra-low emissions vehicles and helping local authorities to develop and implement local air quality plans. There is much more to do, and I commend the hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate on local services? Yesterday, the SNP-led Moray Council announced that it was closing two swimming pools, six public libraries and every public toilet and axing every school crossing patroller as part of a series of swingeing budget cuts. Will the Leader of the House join me in
condemning those SNP cuts in Moray and urge Moray’s representatives to speak to their party at Holyrood and ask Nicola Sturgeon to give Moray a fair deal to stop the cuts happening altogether.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am disappointed to hear about the cuts in my hon. Friend’s constituency. As a result of our decisions at the most recent Budget, Scotland will benefit from a £950 million funding boost, so it seems extraordinary that the council is unable to continue to maintain services that are significant for his constituents.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the earlier question about Venezuela, will the Government make an early statement to clarify their position on the interim President Juan Guaidó? Given that the Organisation of American States, Canada, the United States, a large number of Latin American countries and now some European countries are beginning to recognise him as number one, may we have an urgent clarification of the UK Government’s position?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman makes a serious point. All hon. Members will be worried about what is happening in Venezuela, where we want to see not only stability, but an end to the appalling crisis that is leaving so many people starving. I will certainly take up his request with the Foreign Office.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): May we have a debate on recruitment to the judiciary? Our judges are renowned the world over for their calibre and integrity, which underpin the success of our legal sector, but it is proving increasingly difficult to recruit those judges, so can we have a debate to ensure that this important issue for UK plc gets the attention it deserves?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his long-standing service on the Justice Committee. I gather that he has just retired from that Committee—he seems far too young to be retiring from anything, doesn’t he? He makes a serious and important point. We have Justice questions on 5 February at which I encourage him to raise his point directly with Ministers.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): James Douglas, who died this week aged 30, was your constituent, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am aware that you have no voice in this House to talk of your constituents. James made a huge impact on both of us in the short time we knew him. He leaves a wife and a 14-month-old son. He died, tragically, having contracted motor neurone disease. His benefits assessment gave him zero points, and only days later he received a DS1500, which is given to people who are terminally ill.

James was the inspiration behind my Access to Welfare (Terminal Illness Definition) Bill, which would alter legislation to remove the six-month terminal illness definition. We have no more sitting Fridays, as far as we know. Could we therefore have an opportunity in Government time to debate removing the six-month rule on terminal illness so that we can move things forward?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I send my sympathies to James’s family, and I think the whole House would want to send their condolences. This is a very sad story, and I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her efforts to get her Bill through. As she may have heard me say in response to a previous question, I hope to be able to table a motion next week, or at least as soon as possible, to provide further private Members’ Bills days. There are discussions through the usual channels to ensure that I can do that, and I hope her Bill will be able to make progress.

**Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Yesterday, the Labour Towns group sponsored a debate on a town of culture award, and 20 Back-Bench Members spoke in just 40 minutes, which is possibly a record. May we have a debate in Government time on encouraging our national museums and galleries to loan their artefacts and paintings, some of which have never seen the light of day, to pop-up galleries and museums in the poorest towns of the United Kingdom?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent suggestion that I would be pleased to support. We will have Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions on 31 January, and this would be a good point to raise directly with Ministers.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What has happened to the Agriculture Bill? The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said at the Oxford farming conference that he hoped that the Bill would be with us by the end of January.

In late 2017, the Government fought off a rebellion on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill in relation to article 13 of the Lisbon treaty by saying that they would introduce an animal sentience Bill. What has happened to that?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady will be aware that the Agriculture Bill is going through the parliamentary process as we speak. It will make a decisive shift in support for farmers and ensure that their contribution to maintaining our countryside and producing healthy food is greater than ever before. She will no doubt also be aware that we have committed to a future Bill that will set out the requirement agreed during the passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to establish a new body to ensure that we keep environmental standards high to meet our ambition to be a world leader. That Bill will also include a statement and confirmation on the subject of animal sentience.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Public and Commercial Services Union has launched its booklet “Social security: the case for radical change”. Can we have a debate in Government time on issues such as universalism versus conditionality and a radical overhaul of our social security system?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are seeking to roll out a vastly improved system of support to help people to get into work, and also to provide greater support for those with disabilities to
enable them to lead more fulfilling lives. We have had a number of debates, urgent questions and statements about our social security system. I encourage him, if he would value a further debate, to talk to the Backbench Business Committee and seek the views of colleagues from right across the House.

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to councillors Deb Harvey for her work—she has, as the hon. Lady suggests, contributed a huge amount to pushing this issue forward. I do not know the answer to the hon. Lady’s specific question, but if she would like to contact me after business questions, I will be happy to take the matter up with the relevant Department on her behalf.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the experience of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents. It is appalling when train services are not running, and I completely sympathise. He will be aware that the Government are spending £48 billion—more money than at any time since Victorian days—on the railways to maintain, modernise and renew them so as to deliver better journeys and fewer disruptions. I am genuinely sorry to hear about the problems that he is experiencing, and I encourage him to take the matter up directly in an Adjournment debate so that Ministers can look into those specific problems.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): The Leader of the House will recall that hon. Members, including myself, have raised serious concerns on a number of occasions about foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Most recently, I tabled early-day motion 1911 highlighting the results of research into FASD by Bristol University, which found that up to 17% of children in its research sample of more than 13,000 could have symptoms consistent with FASD.

[That this House is deeply concerned at the new research undertaken by Bristol University which has concluded that up to 17% of children have symptoms consistent with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder; notes the results of the research that up to 79% of children in the research sample of 13,495 were exposed to alcohol consumed in pregnancy and that up to 25% of those children were exposed to binge levels of alcohol in pregnancy; and therefore calls on the Government and the health and education services to take urgent steps to reduce and eliminate alcohol consumption in pregnancy so that children do not suffer irreversible alcohol-related lifetime damage that would diminish their chances of leading healthy, happy, successful and fulfilling lives.]

In the light of that, and much other evidence, will the Leader of the House press her colleagues in government to introduce effective means of addressing this scourge in view of the damage it is doing to millions of lives and its enormous social cost across all of society?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this incredibly troubling issue. We have had a number of debates on the subject. He may be aware that the Prime Minister has asked me to chair a cross-Whitehall group to look at what more can be done to support every family with a new baby in the early days, and this issue is in scope of that review.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House to join me, my constituents, our Cardiff City football club family and fans across the world—especially in Nantes and Argentina—in desperately hoping that our young striker Emiliano Sala and pilot David Ibbotson have survived, as the search for them continues?

Andrea Leadsom: We have all been really shocked to hear of this potential loss of life. I know that everything is being done to try to find out what has happened. I absolutely share in the hon. Lady’s tribute to the football player and the pilot, and I share in the sadness of all those football supporters.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Is the Leader of the House aware of the recently published “Preliminary report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland”, by Sir John Gillen? It highlights some startling concerns, including the “lengthy delays in the court process in Northern Ireland compared with other parts of the UK” and the fact that 40% of complainants in Northern Ireland who raise a sexual offence with the police drop out of the process because they are so harassed in the lead-up to the trial, with those cases never reaching trial.

Given that we have no Assembly in Northern Ireland to make progress on the important recommendations identified by Sir John Gillen, will the Leader of the House ultimately provide time for a debate here and then ensure that procedures are put in place that will allow the enactment of the recommendations for the justice system in Northern Ireland, so that we can bring about good, effective justice for victims of sexual crime in Northern Ireland?

Andrea Leadsom: I was not aware of the particular report that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, but I know that there would be enormous concern across the House about a failure in any part of the United Kingdom properly to consider issues relating to sexual offences. He will be aware that we have Northern Ireland questions on Wednesday 30 January, and I am sure he could seek an Adjournment debate so that he can take up the matter directly with Ministers and discuss what more can be done.
Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I want to talk about the B-word, but thankfully it is not Brexit today. I want to know why funding for bus services has been halved in the past eight years. It has had a huge impact on my constituents, particularly those who live in semi-rural and rural areas. Social isolation remains a big issue, yet bus companies seem constantly to put profits before people and passengers. May we have a debate on the demise of local bus services?

Andrea Leadsom: Should we do such a thing, I would be tempted to join in. Bus services in my constituency have really been cut. I have been looking at community bus services, with some success, and I know that lots of parish councils and communities are seeking to take matters into their own hands and provide themselves with a bus service. I really do pay tribute to all those who do that. The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue, which is of grave concern. The taxpayer is spending £1 billion every year on free bus travel for older and disabled people, and £250 million to keep fares down and maintain an extensive bus network, but there are clearly problems, and I encourage the hon. Lady to seek a Westminster Hall debate or a Back-Bench debate so that she can discuss the issue with Ministers.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House may have noted Santander’s announcement yesterday that it plans to close 140 of its branches around the UK, with up to 1,200 jobs at risk. Those planned closures include 15 branches in Scotland, among which is Santander’s Springburn branch in my constituency. I thought the justification that the bank gave was rather dubious, because it suggested that many people were transferring to using mobile and internet banking technology, but in fact the majority of the users of the branch in my constituency do not use internet or mobile banking, and it is the only branch available without their having to get an exorbitantly priced bus ride into the city centre. The closure will clearly have a massive impact, particularly on elderly people and those who are less able readily to use new technologies. We had a debate on this issue a year ago and clearly nothing has changed, so will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate in Government time on the community impact of large-scale bank branch closures? It is clearly having an impact and we need to consider legislation.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that there are quite strict rules regarding consultation and the provision of a proper evidence base before bank branches are closed. He will also be aware of the agreement with post offices such that they can provide basic banking services, which enable small businesses and individuals to fulfil most of their banking needs. Nevertheless, we must recognise that such services are commercially provided and that the banks have certainly seen a significant drop in footfall. The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue for his local communities and I am very sympathetic; so I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss the matter directly with a Minister.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Department for Education is consulting on proposals to allocate up to £910 million in additional funding to schools and colleges in England to cover higher teacher pension scheme costs in 2019-20. Can we please have a statement clarifying the basis on which this figure was calculated, and whether a Barnett consequential of it will be sufficient to cover the costs in Wales? Given that schools and colleges in Wales will also be impacted by these changes, the UK Government must ensure that funding is made available to them, so that they can fully cover the increased costs.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman’s question. I can well understand it. Schools must be able to cover all the incidental costs arising from changes in pensions policy and so on. He will be aware that we have invested significant sums in schooling to ensure that schools can meet those incidental costs. With regard to his specific question, I would encourage him either to seek an Adjournment debate or to send parliamentary written questions to Ministers.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Planned changes to eligibility for pension credit have recently come to light. They will amount to a loss of up to £7,320 per year for mixed-aged couples, could have a devastating effect on the health and wellbeing of some older people, and could push more pensioners into poverty. It is yet another financial blow to women born in the 1950s, who have had little notice of their delayed pension pay-out. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out why the UK Government believe these changes necessary and how they will improve the lives of some of our poorest pensioners?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue. It is incredibly important that we consider all the issues around pension changes. She will be aware that the Government have sought to ensure fairness between pensions for different types of workers, while recognising that as we live longer, affordability needs to be taken carefully into account. She may be aware that there is a debate next week, on Thursday 31 January, on pensions, and she might like to participate in that.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Tomorrow is the third anniversary of the disappearance in Cairo of the Cambridge PhD student Giulio Regeni. His body was subsequently recovered. He had been brutally tortured and murdered. The case has attracted international attention to issues of human rights and academic freedom. Can we finally have a debate in this place on the work the Government have done to put pressure on the Egyptian authorities to reveal the truth about what happened to Giulio?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear that it is nearing the third anniversary—it is extraordinary how fast time passes—and I am sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman’s request for further clarification. I would encourage him to raise the matter directly with Ministers at the next Foreign Office questions, so that they can prepare an update for him on exactly what steps they have taken.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Holmes review explored how to further open up public appointments to disabled people, and recommended a target of 11.3% disabled public appointees by 2022, with a review by the end of this year. Can we have a statement about how this goal might be achieved?
Andrea Leadsom: I think all hon. Members would support a target to ensure that those with particular needs are catered for in our housing policy. He will be aware that we have Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government questions on Monday 28 January, and I would encourage him to raise that question directly with Ministers.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): My office was recently contacted by a young woman who had fled domestic violence elsewhere in the UK. She was preparing to sleep rough on the streets of Glasgow that night, having been asked to leave a temporary accommodation centre in my constituency and turned away from every other temporary accommodation centre because she was on a student visa and had no recourse to public funds. It was only through the diligence of my caseworker that a charity was found that was able to offer her shelter, and she has now successfully applied for asylum. Can we have a debate in Government time on the gap in support for women in that situation?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a really valid point about teaching young people how to better protect themselves, and he is absolutely right to raise it. He will be aware that the Government are committing more than £1.2 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, including by looking at provision in different areas, but I would encourage him to raise his specific question at local government questions on Monday 28 January.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Last Friday, I joined students at Ellis Guilford School in my constituency as they took part in a “Be Internet Citizens” workshop, hosted by Google and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. The day helped those young people learn about fake news and about hate, on and offline. It will really give them the skills to thrive, on and offline, in their daily lives. Can we have a discussion in Government time about the importance of teaching our young people those skills at the earliest possible age?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a really valid point about teaching young people how to better protect themselves, and he is absolutely right to do so. There is so much that we can do both in terms of encouragement and legislation to ensure that the big social media companies take responsibility, but nothing could be better than encouraging more young people to understand that they themselves need to challenge what they are seeing online. I commend him for raising that point, and I encourage him perhaps to raise it again at Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions next week on 31 January.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): May we have a Government statement on reports that the Ministry of Defence is considering destroying the files relating to the RAF helicopter disaster on the Mull of Kintyre in my Argyll and Bute constituency in June 1994? It is still the RAF’s worse peacetime loss of life. Given the controversy surrounding the tragedy, does the Leader of the House share my concern that if the RAF does destroy those files, the MOD could actually be destroying the only future pathway to establishing exactly what happened on that awful night?

Andrea Leadsom: I was not aware of the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises. I strongly encourage him to write to MOD Ministers directly or, indeed, if he wants to write to me following business questions, I can take it up with the Department on his behalf.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Reports from Yemen say that members of the Baha’i religious community are increasingly being persecuted by Houthi rebels. Many Baha’i leaders are facing spurious criminal charges, and the Houthi leadership has refused appeals to release Baha’is who are imprisoned for their faith. In a televised speech just last year, the leader of the Houthis nullified and denounced the Baha’i faith, further intensifying the ongoing persecution of the Baha’is in that country. Obviously, it is a very important matter. Can we have a statement or a debate on it?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue of great concern, which is the religious persecution of minorities. On this occasion, it is in Yemen, which is, in itself, the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophe. What we all want, and what this Government are working towards, is success in the peace talks, and to be able to provide a long-term resolution to the problem in Yemen. He raises a very serious point about religious persecution, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise it directly with Ministers.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance, which will benefit a number of constituents who have emailed me this morning, following the publication of the amendments for next Tuesday’s business on section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. When will we know Mr Speaker’s selection of amendments? When he has made his selection, can you advise me on whether one amendment will be moved, spoken to and voted on in the order in which they appear on the Order Paper, or in alphabetical order, because there is a difference between the two?

Will you indulge me further, Madam Deputy Speaker? When we know about the selection of amendments, will there be guidance on whether, if one amendment is successful in the Division Lobby, subsequent amendments can stand, or whether they must fall, before we debate the substantive motion?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The selection will be made on the day. The further point that he raised with regard to whether one amendment will fall if another succeeds will obviously depend on the amendments themselves. Mr Speaker will announce his selection on the day.
Joint HMI Prison and Probation Report

12.14 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the findings of the report into the management and supervision of men convicted of sexual offences.

First, let me begin by acknowledging this incredibly important report by Her Majesty’s Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation and, secondly, by passing my apologies to the House, particularly to the shadow spokesman, for the fact that they were not able to receive advance notice of this statement.

Sexual offences are among the most horrifying and tragic of all the incidents with which we have to deal in this Chamber, or indeed in public law. They inflict unspeakable harm on the victim at the moment at which the offence is created, and lasting harm throughout the individual’s life, leading to trauma, which, in the worst cases, can even extend to that individual committing suicide. No one should underestimate in any way the seriousness of this type of offence, or the obligation on the Government and their agencies to protect the public from sex offences.

This is a journey that begins in custody, but needs to go right the way through probation into the community. We are deeply grateful to Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation for the work that they have done to look into this specific issue. I have spoken to both inspectorates this week. I spoke to the new director-general of prisons and the new director-general of probation, and asked them to look carefully at these reports.

At the end of the statement, I will go point by point through the major issues raised, but in essence, the central issues relate to: first, the accommodation provision for sex offenders on release; secondly, the risk assessment process for sex offenders; thirdly, the way in which professional training ties into that risk assessment process; fourthly, the opportunities for rehabilitative programmes; and finally, the question of home visits, and, in particular, issues of children.

Before we move on to those, I want to take this opportunity to reassure the whole House about the overall approach that we take to managing sex offenders, and in particular to public protection. There has been a huge shift over the past 20 years, as hon. and right hon. Members will be aware, in the way that we approach sex offenders. Many more people are now brought to justice for sex offences than were 20 years ago. That does not mean that more people are committing sex offences today; it means that more people are being brought to justice. This is driven by two things in particular: the rise in access to pornography, particularly on the internet; and the prosecution of individuals for historical sex offences—in some cases, committed many, many years ago—and the additional priority that the police have put on bringing those individuals to justice. We therefore have far more people in prison and on probation who are convicted sex offenders than 20 years ago.

When running through this very difficult and unpleasant subject, it is important to be aware of the range of people we include in the term “sex offender”. Some have committed a contact offence; some have not. Let me illustrate for the House what the range could be. Let us look at a recent case: a 50-year-old autistic man in the north of England who became addicted to internet pornography was driven to ever more extreme sites, and was eventually convicted—because we can detect people doing this—of sex offences. He served time in custody and has now come out. In that case, it was possible to work with the individual to get them off the internet and to reduce their offending. It is possible to protect the public from that kind of individual.

However, the range of sex offences goes right the way through to the most extreme high-risk cases, which would be dealt with through particular multi-agency protection arrangements. They would include an adult who was convicted of raping their partner, or an individual who had been in a position of authority, perhaps decades ago, and abused vulnerable children in their care. In thinking about how we deal with sex offenders in prison and on probation, we need to take into account the fact that they are very different individuals. Some of the oldest prisoners are now over 100 years old, and clearly the measures put in place for them will be very different from those put in place for others.

We must consider three things in particular—I would be grateful for an opportunity to discuss this in more detail with right hon. and hon. Members—that we do to protect the public: first, the multi-agency protection arrangements, meaning the way we work with the police and the probation service to ensure that we have a real focus on knowing where an individual is and on ensuring that they adhere to the conditions imposed; secondly, the licence conditions, which are imposed by the Parole Board mostly in cases of high-risk sex offenders; and thirdly, the sex offenders register, which has its own specialised requirements on what can be done with a sex offender.

Given the limited time available, I will focus on the issues raised in the report. The first, which has attracted a great deal of media attention, relates to the accommodation provided to offenders. As right hon. and hon. Members will have seen in the media, the inspectors highlighted cases in which sex offenders were placed in hotel accommodation. The first thing I want to say is that this is something we will work very hard to avoid in future, and I will explain how we will do that shortly. This is a very small number of cases. Every year, over 10,000 people are released from prison under that form of supervision, and of those only 54—sometimes it is 55 or 56—will end up in some type of emergency accommodation. Of those individuals, only a very few—perhaps half a dozen—will end up in hotel accommodation. Before that can happen, the police and the probation service will conduct a detailed risk assessment to ensure that the individual does not pose a risk of a contact offence against a stranger. The individual will have committed a sex offence of the sort I explained at the start of my statement, or will have risk factors that do not impose that kind of risk on the public.

Nevertheless, we should still not place those individuals in that type of accommodation. With the director-general of the probation service, we are doing two major things to address this. First, we are providing the resources to build over 200 additional places in approved premises, so that individuals have such accommodation. Secondly, in the interim, we will work with organisations such as Langley House Trust to provide alternative accommodation. My objective will be to significantly

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reduce, if not entirely eliminate, the possibility of anyone going to that form of hotel accommodation in future.

The second issue raised by the report relates to the risk assessment mechanism. Criticisms have been made about ARMS—active risk management system—which is the monitoring and assessment process that considers the risk factors when dealing with an offender. There is more that we can do on that in professional training. I have asked the director general of the probation service to look at moving the ARMS process, if possible, out of the community, where it has generally been located because of flexible changes in risk, and back into the custodial prison environment at an earlier stage in the process.

The third issue that the inspectors raised relates to approved accommodation. In relation to both approved accommodation and home visits, we must ensure that individuals are visited in their home, and that no gaps emerge between the police and the probation service. There are many other issues that we need to touch on, but I am aware that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, wish to restrict my comments to 10 minutes, on a subject in more detail.

In conclusion, we owe the inspectors a huge debt of gratitude for the work that they have done. We need to acknowledge that they have raised our national probation service as good, and that our public protection mechanisms, which I have mentioned, are among the very best in the world and have been praised by the inspectors, but they have also raised four areas of concern. We will tackle them one by one, because in public protection there is nothing more important than protecting people from the horror and trauma of a sexual offence.

12.25 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I have not had advance sight of the statement, but the Minister, in his courteous manner, explained the reason to me shortly before the statement. I am somewhat astonished that, during his 10-minute deliberation, he failed seriously to consider and concede the true, damming nature of the joint report, which has public protection at its heart. We expect our criminal justice system to keep us safe, to keep our children protected, and to ensure the effective management and supervision of offenders, but it is clear from this damning report into the state of the management and supervision of sex offenders that this is not the case.

The report reads like a catalogue of failures in public protection. All five areas inspected had cases that presented safeguarding concerns, most often in relation to children, and around one in three of the intervention plans made paid insufficient attention to keeping children safe. Almost one in five plans failed to address sufficiently the need to keep the public, known adults and staff safe. Overall, inspectors found that there was poor release planning for sex offenders: many cases failed to present a comprehensive risk management plan and many initial offender assessment systems in prisons were missing. That created a situation in which proper restrictions on the access of sex offenders to children could not be applied, putting those children in real danger. Those are severe failings by the Ministry of Justice, and the public have a right to know that they have been put at risk by the Government.

Can the Minister tell me how many sexual offenders released since the beginning of the transforming rehabilitation programme have gone on to reoffend? How many adults and children have been put at risk by the serious failures identified in the report? Of particular note is the threat to the public posed by the inadequate and unsafe resettlement of sexual offenders after release, which he has today acknowledged.

The report identifies two instances, in the small sample, of offenders being released into budget hotels or other temporary accommodation instead of approved premises. The inspectorates have said that it was hard to see a defence for that decision in relation to protecting the public. How many offenders have been released into non-approved premises, how long did they stay in such premises, and what supervision and monitoring arrangements were in place? Does the Minister believe that such a decision was defensible? Following the Government’s privatisation of night-watch staff at approved premises, despite repeated warnings, what assessment has he made of this privatisation of public safety, and does he agree with the unions that that, too, will put the public at risk?

It is also evident that the failings found in the report have been caused and aggravated by the Government’s ill-judged and poorly delivered transforming rehabilitation programme, and their relentless, ideological cuts to the Prison Service. The transforming rehabilitation programme has dangerously and recklessly fragmented the probation system, creating a vastly increased and distressing workload that many staff find difficult to manage, with one in four NPS staff saying that they were not properly prepared for sexual offender work, and supervisors in both prisons and the probation service receiving little or no training. Without sufficient support, we risk losing committed and experienced staff in the probation system, just as we have seen in the prisons system.

What assessment has the Minister made of the transforming rehabilitation agenda on the ability of probation officers to monitor at-risk sexual offenders effectively and protect the public? What assessment has he made of the loss of experienced probation officers and thousands of experienced prison officers, and the impact of these losses on the MOJ’s ability to manage and supervise offenders? Ultimately, does he agree with the probation inspector that “the public are not sufficiently protected” from sexual offenders?

Rory Stewart: I thank the shadow Minister for his questions, which essentially focused on three separate issues: the transforming rehabilitation programme, reoffending rates, and accommodation. On accommodation, I absolutely share his concerns. He asked for the absolute numbers. As I said, the current numbers suggest that across the country, of the more than 10,000 people being released, 56 are being put in emergency accommodation—so a very small number. The number of those going into hotels would be a fraction of that—something in the region of half a dozen. However, as I said, we are doing all we can to eliminate this entirely. One of the ways
in which we are aiming to do so is by building over 200 additional places in approved premises, of which half will be delivered next year.

The hon. Gentleman’s second question was on reoffending rates for sex offenders. Any reoffending by any offender is a tragedy; reoffending by a sex offender is a horrifying tragedy. The reality is that reoffending rates among sex offenders are significantly lower than reoffending rates among the population as a whole. At the moment, reoffending rates among short-term prisoners are running at about 60%, while reoffending rates among sex offenders are about eight times lower than that. In the case of low-risk sex offenders, the re-conviction rate is 0.8%. That means that 99.2% of people are not re-convicted. But 0.8% is still too high a figure, and there is much more that we can do to try to drive it down.

Where I would disagree slightly with the hon. Gentleman is in connecting this matter to the transforming rehabilitation programme. The question of the management of sex offenders is not about the community rehabilitation companies. Almost every sex offender is managed by the national probation service—in other words, managed by the Government, by civil servants, by a public agency. It has nothing to do with a move towards the private sector or the decisions that have been made to bring in the charitable sector. The report is absolutely explicit—both inspectors are clear on this all the way through—that it is on the performance of the national probation service, not the CRCs. The CRCs are not engaged with in this report. There has been investment in the national probation service since the beginning of the transforming rehabilitation programme. There have been many challenges for the national probation service in terms of its caseload and the types of offences that are coming forward, but, when all is said and done, there is a 9.7% budget increase in the resource going into the service.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind the House that we have two very well-subscribed debates this afternoon, particularly the one on Holocaust Memorial Day. I therefore ask colleagues to make their questions, and the Minister to make his answers, as brief as possible.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s frankness about the extent of the problem. Dame Glenys Stacey is a highly regarded and robustly independent inspector, and what she says is grave.

The Minister has rightly highlighted a number of specific areas that need to be looked at, and I have no doubt that the Justice Committee will wish to take this matter further. In addition to the specifics that he is going to work with, what is to be done to deal with an underlying problem highlighted in the report—the disconnect between what the leadership of the national probation service perceives is being done and what is actually delivered on the ground, with the lack of face-to-face contact, the over-reliance on emails, and the sense that staff are not fully supported? That is a systemic problem, and it is not the first time that the Select Committee and the inspectors have found it to exist. What steps will he be taking to deal with that underlying issue?

Rory Stewart: To take the hon. Lady’s last point first, we will look very closely at that. I am very happy to have a meeting with her as soon as possible in order to do so.

The hon. Lady raised some very serious points, and I agree with all of them. We already have in place a lot of procedures to ensure that staff dealing with traumatic cases are given proper breaks and proper support. However, there are ongoing challenges, particularly around IT—data management and information-sharing between different databases that we are trying to address by making the tools simpler and by making sure that the databases speak to each other properly.

The hon. Lady’s questions about MAPPA and accommodation are absolutely on the nail. Because of the limited time, it is difficult to go through all the policy areas in detail, but she made five very strong points, and I thank her.
Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): May I join in the general welcome for the inspectors’ report in this extremely difficult area? I acknowledge that this is a growing area of criminal justice interest because of the public anxiety behind the nature of these offences, for all the reasons the Minister gave about the growing burden on the service. In order to understand the nature of the cause of the offending behaviour—for the probation officers overseeing it and for offender managers generally, but also for the offenders themselves so that they can manage their behaviour in future—it is critical that the investment in forensic psychology is appropriate to the demand placed on the system. Is he satisfied that sufficient resources from the national health service and from elsewhere are going into the criminal justice system in order for it to manage the scale of the problem that it is having to manage?

Rory Stewart: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who was a prisons and probation Minister. The connection with the NHS is central. Additional funding has gone into the NHS, and we need to ensure that that focuses on the most vulnerable offenders in terms of mental health, addiction and the need for courses provided by the national health service. Getting that right will be essential in dealing with violent crime, sex offences and short-sentence offences. The NHS connection is vital. The most important thing, from my point of view, is ensuring that we have the treatment provision in the community for addiction.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I was really disappointed to hear the Minister’s assertion that the transforming rehabilitation programme has had no impact on the results in this report, because most of these offenders are within the national probation service sector. Trade unions whose members work in this sector have long argued that transforming rehabilitation would damage public safety, and public concern about what it has done is strong. Surely he must now agree that those concerns were legitimate.

Rory Stewart: I agree that there are significant concerns about transforming rehabilitation, which is why we are looking at that seriously. We have issued a consultation on that and will be issuing reforms. My point is narrower: the issue of sex offenders is for the national probation service and is not affected by the CRCs.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): This time last year, John Worboys’s release on parole was being planned. Many women in my part of London, including my constituent who was attacked by him, were extremely concerned about that decision. The report today underlines why people were so worried about the services’ ability to manage him, had he been allowed out of prison. I welcome the steps that the Minister is setting out, but how will he keep the House updated on the success of those steps and whether he is satisfied with the progress being made, in the light of this important report?

Rory Stewart: I am happy to continue to update the House on progress. The Worboys case taught us some important lessons about pre-sentence reports and connections between the Ministry of Justice and the Parole Board, and we are conducting an extensive review of that. It is important to remind the House that in the most extreme cases—MAPPA 3 cases—we have very significant protections in place for the public. I can hold forth on that in more detail if Members want to talk about the protection arrangements.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): This report is littered with shocking findings. One of the most shocking is when the inspector writes: “in 40 per cent of cases there had been no work focused on reducing the risk of sexual offending at all.” How has that been allowed to happen? When will we have the trained staff to put it right? This is a matter of urgency.

Rory Stewart: The specific issue there is around the provision of accredited programmes, and there are two problems. The first is that accredited programmes are not suitable for all sex offenders. At the moment, we do not have programmes that are able to reduce the risk of reoffending significantly. In fact, some of the past sex offender treatment programmes can increase rather than decrease the chance of reoffending if they are delivered to the wrong type of sex offender. We have to distinguish between lower risk and higher risk sex offenders and ensure that we are delivering programmes in the right way. The Horizon and Kaizen programmes, which we have rolled out, are key to that, but they are not the key for everyone. I agree that we can do more to assess and to record, but I politely disagree with the inspector’s implication that we should attempt to deliver accredited programmes to 100% of these cases.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): This report is largely about the risk of recidivism and the need to rehabilitate, but at the heart of the criminal justice system is the protection of the public. The malign and the malicious should be locked away, lest they do further harm, and the system can be simultaneously retributive and rehabilitative. Will the Minister look at the principle of just deserts, which has a long philosophical genealogy and is in tune with the opinion of the public, who believe that the vulnerable should be protected and the wicked punished?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. In fact, if we simply look at the statistics, we see that we are much stricter now on sex offenders than ever before in British history—people are getting longer and longer sentences, and there is a reason for that. It is about ensuring that people receive indeterminate life sentences if necessary and are only released if the Parole Board approves, but it is also about ensuring that when people are released, they are on the sex offenders register, that the licence conditions are as strict and specific as possible, and that the multi-agency public protection arrangements are at the right level and properly enforced.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): In my experience of working with men who abuse their partners, the underlying attitudes of sexual offenders such as Worboys who repeatedly rape and abuse women are frequently misogynistic and women-hating. What will the Minister do in his review of treatment programmes to ensure that staff have the training, support and supervision they need to tackle those misogynistic and women-hating attitudes?
Rory Stewart: We are learning an enormous amount about how to do accredited programmes well, and we should do more on that. One lesson we have drawn from the past programmes is that we have to get the balance right between not focusing too much on people’s past behaviour and trying to focus on coping mechanisms for their future behaviour, to identify their risks and avoid them. One problem with past programmes was, unfortunately, that focusing on past behaviour seems to encourage people to reoffend more. We must get the balance right between these offenders accepting the shame and guilt for their past performance, understanding the drivers and, above all, thinking about what happens when they come out, to ensure that they do not put themselves in a position to do it again.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is, of course, welcome that more victims are getting justice, even if it is many years after the abuse they suffered. As the Minister rightly outlined in his statement, this puts pressure on the system. Can he confirm that there will be a move towards supervised accommodation where possible for those who are released from jail following these offences, not only for their rehabilitation but to reassure their victims?

Rory Stewart: Yes. One reason that we have committed to building more than 200 additional places in approved premises is to provide what my hon. Friend requests. 

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): This morning I was contacted by residents near Bedford Prison, who say that the screens that prevent prisoners from seeing into neighbouring gardens have been smashed, and prisoners shout and intimidate them day and night. Will the Minister act immediately to protect my constituents from that continued disturbance and protect their right to privacy?

Rory Stewart: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, I visited Bedford Prison last week. I will immediately raise that with the governor and prison group director and attempt to address the problem.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): My constituency is home to North Sea Camp Prison, which is a category D prison, colloquially known as an open prison. My constituents are concerned that people are put into such a prison before they are ready for that level of responsibility. Can the Minister reassure me that he will continue to do everything he can to ensure that people are only put in open conditions when they are ready for it?

Rory Stewart: This is a central point. We actually put very few people into open conditions. The number of prisoners in the category D estate is quite small. That is because a serious risk assessment process is conducted before someone is put in those conditions, involving the governor, the offender management in custody model and probation officers. We can continue to learn lessons when things go wrong, but by and large, we are confident that our open prisons are well managed and that the correct prisoners are in them.
Listening to those survivors and visiting Auschwitz or other sites of mass murder is a truly life-changing experience. I thought I knew what to expect when I first visited Auschwitz with the Holocaust Educational Trust and students from Dudley, but nothing can prepare you for seeing the place for real. I will never forget seeing a mountain of human hair—two and a half tonnes of it—shaved from the heads of inmates to be shipped back to Germany and made into cloth, or the huge piles of shoes, glasses and suitcases.

Last year, I spent a week touring Poland with a brilliant project called March of the Living, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan). We visited the sites of ghettos and concentration camps, before marching—thousands of us—from Auschwitz to Birkenau, but I will never forget visiting Belzec. It is a tiny site, about as big as two football pitches, where hundreds of thousands of people were murdered. Imagine this: at the peak of the killing in 1942, three or four transport trains arrived every day. In one month, August 1942, 130,000 Jews were murdered in Belzec. Imagine that: 130,000 people slaughtered in a place the size of two football pitches in just one month.

What also brings home the horror of the holocaust is visiting towns and cities where whole communities were wiped out. A few years ago, my dad and I went back to Ostrava. We found the flat that he had lived in and the site of his school and his synagogue. In 1937, 10,000 Jews lived in Ostrava. The town had several synagogues and Jewish schools and businesses. In the single room that serves as its synagogue today, there are seats for 30 people—30 people. In Poland, we went to a place called Nowy Targ, where we found what had been my dad’s uncle’s shop. There is a mass grave of the 500 Jews butchered in a day, including at least one of his cousins. Some 3,000 Jewish people lived there before the war. “How many live here now?” I asked the local historian who was showing us around. She looked at me as if I was mad. She said, “None”—none.

A few weeks before Christmas, we met in Speaker’s House to commemorate the anniversary of the Kindertransport. We remembered how, when other countries were rounding up their Jews and herding them on to trains to the gas chambers, Britain provided a haven for thousands of refugee children. Think of Britain in the 30s: the rest of Europe was succumbing to fascism—Hitler in Germany, Mussolini in Italy, Franco in Spain—but here in Britain, Mosley was rejected. Imagine 1941: France invaded, Europe overrun. America not yet in the war and just one country standing for freedom and democracy, fighting not just for our liberty, but for the freedom of the whole world.

It is true that Britain did not do enough during the holocaust and could of course have done more, but it was British troops who liberated Bergen-Belsen, rescuing thousands of inmates from certain death. So when people say to me, “What does it mean to be British? What is special or unique about our country?” I say that it is because of who we are as a people and what we are as a country that British people stood up to the Nazis and laid down their lives for freedom. What makes you British is not what you look like, where you were born or how you worship, but the contribution you make and your belief in the timeless British values—values British people have fought and died for—of democracy, equality, freedom, fairness and tolerance.

No one embodies these values more than Major Frank Foley. He was an MI6 agent at the British embassy in Berlin in the 1930s, working undercover as a passport control officer. He provided papers to let Jewish people escape, forged passports and even sheltered people in his own home. He went into concentration camps to get Jewish people out and enable them to leave the country. Last September, His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge visited Stourbridge in Dudley to unveil the statue that we produced of Major Foley. It was a huge honour for the people of Dudley, and a wonderful tribute to a great British hero. I think it was so impressive to see our future monarch taking such a close interest in these events, as we saw with his recent visits to Stutthof and to Yad Vashem.

Frank Foley sheltered people in his own home and, as I said a moment ago, even rescued people from concentration camps, including the father-in-law of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. However, the really extraordinary thing about Frank Foley is that his courage, decency and determination were matched by his modesty. He retired in complete anonymity—never telling anybody about what he had done, never boasting about his heroism—to a quiet street in Stourbridge, where he lived out his retirement until his death in 1958. When people are singled out or extremists try to divide our communities on the grounds of race or religion, we should remember this great hero’s example and find it within ourselves to stand up for decency, fairness and tolerance.

I was flicking through The Daily Telegraph a couple of years ago when I came across the obituary of Rose Evansky, who had died aged 94. She pioneered modern hairdressing and became one of most famous and influential hairdressers ever. The amazing thing about her, however, is that she had been born in Germany in 1922 and when, in 1938, her Jewish father was imprisoned in Dachau, she managed to escape on the Kindertransport and she arrived in Dudley as a refugee. She was able to escape only because a local family, who were not related to her and had never even met her, heard about her from a refugee committee and put up the £50 guarantee—a lot of money in those days—that had to be paid before she could escape.

A few months later, in 1939, a 14-year-old German refugee called Kurt Flossman arrived at Dudley Grammar School aged just 14. His father had died in 1937, and he made his way across Europe on his own. His classmates—I think this is brilliant—clubbed together to fund his expenses, and local firms paid for his clothes. Stories like this show that Dudley, like the rest of our country, has always worked to help those in need and to build a tolerant community. Over the years Dudley—Britain—has welcomed refugees from around the world, so when our country opens its doors to what we now call unaccompanied minors or to others fleeing persecution, let us remember that this is what Britain has always done: this is who we are and it is what we do.

I grew up learning about the holocaust from my parents and hearing stories about the suffering, the appalling cruelty and the scale of the slaughter, and I left me with a conviction that I have held ever since. It is a conviction that prejudice leads to intolerance,
then to victimisation and eventually to persecution. It is a conviction as well that we have a duty, every single one of us, not to stand by, but to make a difference and to fight discrimination, intolerance and bigotry wherever we find it.

One of the reasons I joined the Labour party as a teenager in Dudley 35 years ago was to fight racism. I believe that just as passionately now as I did then, and I am shocked that a party with such a long tradition of fighting racism has caused such offence and distress to the Jewish community. The first thing I did when I became an MP was lead a campaign to drive the British National party, which had a councillor in Dudley, out of the town. Since then I have stood with Muslim constituents who have been targeted by the English Defence League, but that would all be completely meaningless if I ignored antisemitism in my own party. It is easy to oppose racism at events or in meetings where everyone agrees with you. It is easy for those of us in politics to criticise our opponents, but that is completely meaningless if we are not also prepared to criticise when it is more difficult. Labour Members must understand that we will have no right to criticise our opponents on such issues if we do not first get our own house in order.

I wish to finish on a more positive note and say how pleased I am that we will soon have the new national holocaust memorial and learning centre next to Parliament, at the very centre of our democracy and national life. It will enable future generations to remember the victims of the holocaust, and learn the lessons of history through individual stories of survival, bravery and courage. For me, the importance of remembering the holocaust is to remember history’s greatest crime, and to pay our respects to all who suffered at the hands of the Nazis, as well as in more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur and the rest. We must remind ourselves that what makes us the people we are, and Britain the country it is, is the unique response to the holocaust and the Nazis. Let us use this debate to rededicate ourselves to the timeless values of democracy, equality, freedom, fairness and tolerance. Let us pledge again to fight prejudice and racism wherever it is found, because that is the best tribute any of us can pay to the memory of those who were killed in history’s greatest crime.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Colleagues will appreciate that there is pressure on time because this debate is well subscribed. I therefore impose a five-minute time limit on speeches, starting now.

1.2 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): This House, and the memory of those who died in the holocaust, have been honoured by the speech that we heard from the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), and I thank him for the way he introduced this debate. On a separate day, and in a separate way, I would like to engage with him and the whole House on the question of whether the proposed learning centre in Victoria Tower gardens is the appropriate place, but that is for another day.

I wish to concentrate my remarks on what happened on Sunday at Bushey New Cemetery. A number of us were present at the service and burial of the remains of six people whose ashes and bones had been given to the Imperial War museum which, once it knew what it had, and after analysis, quickly provided them for burial as soon as possible. Each of the five adults represented 1 million people who died in the holocaust, and as the Chief Rabbi reminded us at the service, the child represented more than 1 million children who died.

Most of us do not know quite who we are. As J. B. Priestley said, if someone can name their eight great-grandparents, they will have a better clue about who they are than he had about himself. My family has always known we had a Jewish ancestor, and we now know that many of my grandfather’s cousins died. Indeed, if we include the extended families, more than 100 people died, including 45 at Auschwitz, 45 at Sobibór, and others in other places. I mourn those who died who have no people to remember them, or those who do not know their family links and cannot provide a living memory of those who went before and who suffered.

The question I put to my constituency in my article this week concerned which would have been the right year to have intervened, with force, against Mr Hitler. Would it have been 1933, when The Economist, and Douglas Jay, were writing articles about the threat that existed for people? Would it have been 1934 or 1935, and so on through to 1939, when we did the things that the hon. Member for Dudley North referred to, or 1940, 1941, or ever, or never? There would never have been unanimity in the country.

I hope that Conservative Members will not make remarks about the difficulties faced by the Labour party. We ought to concentrate on why Mr Hitler thought that he might get support in this country, giving him a free hand to do what he wanted in continental Europe, eliminating Jews throughout the continent, and leaving Great Britain aside. He did that because he thought that there were people who might sympathise with his view. If one reads Iain Wilton’s very good biography of Charles Burgess Fry—one of the greatest sportsmen this country has ever had—one sees that he made the mistake in 1934 of flirting with fascism, and of going to see Mr Hitler and discussing issues with him. He was not the only one. Charles Burgess Fry was not a Conservative, but there were Conservatives in the late ‘30s who would probably have been reasonably happy to have stayed out of conflict.

I want people to remember those who helped to save many and those who failed to save more, but the biggest worry of all is the idea that pacifism is the right approach. My wife’s grandfather was sacked as Secretary of the League of Nations Union in 1938 by the appeasers.

The League of Nations was not set up to be pacifist; it was set up to bring peace, and the United Nations needs to do the same thing. When we consider holocausts that have taken place, not on the same intended scale as Mr Hitler’s, but those involving Muslims in former Yugoslavia, or what is now going on in some countries where oppressive regimes bully and beat people to death, we should reflect on how we can enforce a duty to protect on Governments, so that they cannot with impunity cull their own people and bully them, especially if people are picked out on grounds of race, colour or religion.
I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dudley North for introducing this debate, and I hope that at some other stage we can have that debate about the national Holocaust memorial and learning centre.

1.6 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) for the moving, thoughtful and inspirational way that he opened this debate. Last spring, as he said, we had the honour to join the annual March of the Living which, alongside Holocaust survivors and young people from around the world, took us from Auschwitz to Birkenau. During the week, we stopped in places such as Belzec and the forest of Zbylitowska Gora, where 6,000 Jews, including 800 children, were murdered. It was a very moving experience.

Those memories are very much in my mind today as we mark Holocaust Memorial Day and the tearing of places such as Belzec and the forest of Zbylitowska Gora, where 6,000 Jews, including 800 children, were murdered. It was a very moving experience.

Before travelling to Poland, we were encouraged to read the stories of some of those who survived the Shoah. They were stories of tragedy and loss, but also of bravery, love, and the endurance of the human spirit. They were about men and women such as Freddie Knoller, who fought in the French resistance, but when captured chose to confess that he was a Jew rather than denounce his comrades. Eve Kugler—she has already been mentioned—wrote after the second world war that “we started again with nothing except the Jewish beliefs and values that the Nazis could never take from us.” Their stories recall the words of the late Martin Gilbert who said:

“Even in the darkness of the Holocaust, there were sparks of light.”

Our journey also gave us the opportunity to celebrate the life of the Jewish people’s homeland, which was reborn in the aftermath of the Holocaust. We recalled the contribution of the survivors to the state of Israel, and all that many of us admire so much about its achievements, its values, and its resilience.

However, remembrance and celebration alone are not enough to truly honour those who died in the Holocaust and those who risked all to save the lives of others; we must also learn from the Holocaust. Tragically, the flames of racial and religious hatred continue to be fanned around the world. Antisemitism remains a scourge of the modern world. Hideous antisemitic tropes, repugnant conspiracy theories and malicious examples of Holocaust denial are all used by populists and demagogues for political ends throughout the Middle East and in Europe.

Another theme that really stood out from that journey last spring, and the fact that even in the midst of places of great horror and suffering, we celebrated life.

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Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that so much more needs to be done to tackle the scourge on social media? It is an absolute cesspit on sites like Facebook and Twitter—the degree of antisemitism that we see. As we remember the Holocaust today, we remember also that it did not happen in a vacuum; it happened because of the context—prejudice and the dehumanisation of people. We see that today on social media. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must see more, both in terms of legislation and from the social media companies themselves, to deal with this scourge?

Joan Ryan: My hon. Friend makes an important point, with which I absolutely agree. Much is said, but not enough is done, about this pernicious form of hate crime.

Here in the UK, on campuses, in trade unions and even, sadly, as we have heard, in the Labour party, pernicious comparisons have been drawn between Israel and Nazi Germany. In the United States, we see neo-Nazis, racists and white supremacists tolerated, excused and encouraged by those at the highest levels. We must stand up with courage against antisemitism and racism every day, wherever we find it.

One of the greatest weapons at our disposal in this fight is education. As Sir Ben Helfgott—a Holocaust survivor—has suggested, we must all do our utmost to help create greater harmony, mutual respect and understanding amongst people.

So I commend the vital work of organisations such as the Holocaust Educational Trust, March of the Living and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. By teaching younger generations about the horrors of the past, they are working for a future that is free of hate. Let us remember, too, the moral duty that each of us has to play our part in this struggle. That duty was best put by Elie Wiesel, who wrote:

“The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.”

1.11 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is a real privilege and pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan).

In November, I had the opportunity to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau to participate in the Holocaust Educational Trust’s “Lessons from Auschwitz” programme. I had heard previously from students and teachers in my constituency that it was a personal and educational experience like no other, so I am grateful to the trust for giving me the opportunity to see how that important educational programme is delivered.

Auschwitz-Birkenau is a place of fascination. The architecture, the gateway, the railway line have become immediately recognisable symbols of the Holocaust. It draws visitors by the thousands every week. It features in the Lonely Planet guide under “attractions”. It also remains one of the world’s largest crime scenes—a place of proof and evidence—even as some continue to promote theories, whether through vile cartoons or pseudo-academic papers, that these events never took place.

Auschwitz is also, for many, a deeply spiritual place. For some, it is a place where God did not intervene—where He turned His back. For others, it is the place where faith found new depths and new heights, even in the midst of a visitation of pure evil on an entire people group.

I have had the privilege to meet several survivors of Auschwitz and of other death camps. One cannot fail to be moved by the grace and depth of these remarkable
individuals. Last October, Susan Pollock MBE, who survived both Auschwitz and Belsen as a young girl, gave probably the most meaningful talk I have ever heard at a Conservative Party conference. She left the whole room stunned; there were tears running down our faces as she shared her memories and experiences and spoke of forgiveness and of breaking down barriers. I thought, what an incredible, humbling privilege it is for us, as a society, to have these people still living among us. The precious twilight years of so many such survivors are now devoted to educating and informing younger generations about the past—what they saw and what they lived through.

Holocaust Memorial Day this Sunday is about honouring the survivors, as well as reflecting on the devastating losses and the destruction of a whole culture in central Europe. It is also a day about the present and the future. That is what makes it so vital that the Government should continue to support the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust.

What is the message? What lessons cry out to us today from these darkest of events? For me, the lesson is that the roots and origins of the Holocaust run very deep, that it did not just happen by accident in the chaos of warfare. Visitors learn something similar when they go to the Genocide memorial and museum in Kigali, Rwanda, which I have visited several times. Genocides require planning, organisation, equipment, supplies. That needs effective management and leadership. However, to undertake something so horrific on such a vast scale, something else is required. Yes, genocide requires a large number of people to carry out tasks, but it requires an even larger number of people to turn a blind eye—not to question, not to resist. It requires a population to stay silent, out of fear or assent.

In all examples of genocide we see the same pattern, where the violence and killing has been supported by years of conditioning the population to really hate the group that is being targeted for elimination. It starts with what we now call stereotyping—generalisations, mockery, blame, lies, bullying, verbal abuse, victimising, conspiracy theories. That is what provides the deep soil from which grow the hideous and vile acts of genocide. That is the very essence of antisemitism. Who can say that we are not living with that in our very midst in 2019? That is the lived experience of some of our constituents, right now.

So this week—a week when many of us have signed the Book of Commitment downstairs, and when we shall be remembering Holocaust Memorial Day on Sunday—is about pledging to act; to label and call out the acts that we come across daily for what they are. As a new MP in my first term, I was in the Tea Room talking to a colleague about a forthcoming Conservative Friends of Israel trip to Israel. A rather grand colleague, who is no longer in this place, said to me, “Be careful, young man. You wouldn’t be the first gentile to be taken in.” I am ashamed to say that I let that remark go. The remark reflected the dark stereotypes of the Jewish people, drawing on ideas of conspiracy, manipulation and deception. I am ashamed that I did not stand up to it on that occasion. We have an opportunity, on this memorial day, to reflect on what we can do and to renew our commitment to act.

1.17 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I hope we are not just “considering” Holocaust Memorial Day, with our antiquated practices in this place, but endorsing it.

I pay tribute to my team of Danny Stone, Amy Wagner and Ally Routledge, who put together the Sara conference in November—“Sara” after the Nazi name forced on Jewish women in 1938 to show that they were Jewish. That conference looked at misogyny and antisemitism; I bring to the House just one nugget from it. Wages and Ally Routledge, who put together the Sara conference in November—“Sara” after the Nazi name forced on Jewish women in 1938 to show that they were Jewish. That conference looked at misogyny and antisemitism; I bring to the House just one nugget from it.

We have seen it in the past few days, with the TV personality, Rachel Riley, and the abuse that she has received from many for standing up to antisemitism, in this week. Well, I stand, and I hope we all stand, with Rachel Riley, recognising the bravery of that young woman—one amongst many, one of the better known, and therefore the more abused—for standing up against modern antisemitism.

My parents died very young, but I only ever saw them both angry once. That was in 1972, seeing the television footage of Israeli athletes being murdered in Munich. That meant so much, in terms of understanding the realities of the Jewish people at the time. That was the only time I ever saw my parents angry together in their lives but, if they were alive today, that would not have been the only time that they were angry. Holocaust revisionism is the current-day plague that we have to challenge and fight, rather than the ignorant and thick-skinned revisionism of the past, who were quite easy to challenge. There are far too many around.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Mann: If I may, I will continue.

The problem is not just a British one, and we do not like talking about some of these things, but I am quite hard-nosed about some things now. When I went around Majdanek, I observed it in detail. In an hour, at every major exhibit and in the gas chambers, one could go around without even realising that the Jewish people were the target of the Nazis in the Holocaust. I went to the cathedral, up the tower, and I did not need binoculars—one can see Majdanek from the centre of Lublin now, as people could at the time. Yet there is still not a single reference in the exhibitions to the fact that the target there—the mass murders—were primarily the local and Polish Jewish population.

Holocaust revisionism—it is a problem all over Europe, it is a problem in my political party, it is a problem in this country and it is a problem that we are not facing up to sufficiently robustly or successfully. That is why Rachel Riley gets all the crap that she gets at the moment. Holocaust revisionism is not understanding
the realities of what happened and what that means today. That is why I am angry. I endorse, as I am sure we all endorse, Holocaust Memorial Day today.

1.22 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow such a powerful speech by my neighbour and the excellent chair of the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann).

I join others in paying tribute to the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust—to Karen Pollock and her team, which includes one of my former staff members, Robert Lingard, an east Yorkshire boy who has no Jewish ancestry, but has very much been drawn into this issue. I pay tribute to him and all the team at the trust.

My community and I are proud to be associated with a new Holocaust memorial in Brigg. Our area has no real Jewish history; there is some in east Yorkshire, Grimsby and Hull, but not particularly in my constituency. Brigg Town Council has had a small memorial for many years, but given what has happened in recent times, it wanted to show its partnership with and commitment to those who were murdered in the Holocaust by creating a new and bigger Holocaust memorial in Brigg, which I am pleased will be unveiled this year.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The Holocaust is what happened to the Jews of Europe, but we should recall that the genocide that the Nazis inflicted on Europe took a great number of other people. For example, it is said that 3 million Christian Poles were killed for “Lebensraum”. For me, Holocaust Memorial Day means them, too; I am quite sure that the Holocaust Educational Trust would not mind that association.

Andrew Percy: Of course. That is patently true. Brigg has a long Gypsy and Traveller heritage, going back centuries. Sometimes the problem is that some of those arguments are used by revisionists who seek to undermine the fact that the real target of the Holocaust was the Jews of Europe.

I am proud that a memorial is to be unveiled on Millennium Green in Brigg, and I am proud of the young people from Sir John Nelthorpe School and the Vale Academy in Brigg who entered the competition to design the memorial. I pay particular tribute to Izzy Roberts, a year 10 pupil from Sir John Nelthorpe School, whose design won out. I also thank the town council, which committed £5,000, and local businesses Keyo, East Coast Surfacing and Turnbull, which put their hand in their pocket to fund the memorial. My constituents, despite the area not having a big Jewish population, have seen what has been going on recently in this country in terms of antisemitism and hate. The community wants to show that it will not allow anyone to forget or downplay the suffering and horror of the Holocaust.

I refer to what is going on at the moment because it is a cancer in our politics, on both the left and the right. In recent days and weeks, I have been appalled to see references made to the Jewish ancestry of Mr Speaker or other colleagues. They might have a different perspective from me on the Brexit debate, but to have their Jewish ancestry brought into it was truly disgusting. Those who did that do not speak for people like me, and the near 77% of my constituents who voted leave in the referendum. Antisemitism is an issue on the far left and on the far right.

I will tell a story about why I think that there is something peculiarly evil and different about Jew haters. Some colleagues might know that I converted—I would say converted back—to Judaism some time ago. I had never really faced any racism before that, apart from once at a cash machine in Edinburgh, when I was told to eff off back to England by someone who had obviously had too much to drink. I had never really given racism a thought, but I converted to Judaism and was then subjected to two incidents, by the same people on different occasions. Sadly, one incident started with them chanting the Leader of the Opposition’s name at me, and then screaming that I was “Israeli scum” and responsible for killing Palestinian children. This is not a political point, because those people do not speak for the vast mass of Labour members. Indeed, I suspect that they were not Labour members. That first incident was bad enough: it was reported to the police, but no action was taken, unfortunately.

The second incident happened in a shopping centre in Doncaster. The same people again screamed at me for being “Israeli scum”. This is where Jew hate is somewhat different: the incident became more sinister when one of the individuals said, “You should tell people before an election that you’re a Jew.” Obviously, I was taken aback by that; it was a nasty incident. I was then told to eff off and “eat my Jew halal food.” I could say something about the education levels of such people. The interesting point, however, is that they started with Israel and moved on to my own Judaism. A few years ago, when I responded as a Minister to the Holocaust Memorial Day debate from the Dispatch Box, I talked about that Israelification of antisemitism, which we have to be very careful about. I was tempted to use parliamentary privilege to name those individuals because, I am sad to say, due to the failings of Humberside police, the trial which had been set has unfortunately not taken place; the police failed to follow certain procedures. However, I will not name those people today, because I am better than them.

This is a particular hate that is different from some of the other hate that we see in politics, though all of it is unacceptable. Since I converted to Judaism, I have understood the peculiarly evil element behind antisemitism. I am disgusted by it, and I am ashamed that it is on both sides of politics at the moment—on the far left and the far right. Days such as Holocaust Memorial Day are vital to remind us all of the role we have to play in preventing its spread.

1.29 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), who spoke with great passion, and shared with the House his personal experience of the modern manifestations of antisemitism.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on the way in which he opened the debate, the tone that he set for it, and the fact that so many Members on both sides of the House are here today. That is also a great testament to the valuable work of the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust.
I think it important to reflect on what Holocaust Memorial Day actually is. Why do we commemorate it on 27 January? The answer is that it marks the date on which the Red Army liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945. That was the site where nearly a million people were murdered, but, as we know, it was just one of the many terrible death camps across Europe.

I reflect on my own family experience. On my mother’s side alone, we know that more than 100 members of her family, aged between four and 83, were sent by the Nazis to their deaths in the gas chambers of not just Auschwitz but Treblinka, Sobibór, Mauthausen and Bergen-Belsen, for no other reason than that they were Jewish.

It is beyond our comprehension that humans are capable of inflicting such horrors on other humans. It questions the very nature of humanity, and leads us to the contemplation of evil. Yet we have continued to witness horrors in our own times, in Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia, and the House recently debated the plight of the Rohingya in Burma, driven from their homes, their villages in flames.

Humanity never seems to fully learn the lessons of history. That is why Holocaust Memorial Day is so vital and continuing holocaust education is so critical—so that we can do everything possible to ensure that it really does not ever happen again. It is why we celebrate the lives of survivors who are now in their 80s and 90s, such as Susan Pollack MBE, with whom I had the privilege to share a platform a few months ago at the Labour party conference in Liverpool. Susan was in Belsen when the British liberated it, and still visits schools to talk about her experiences. It is why we mourn the passing of so many holocaust survivors, particularly in the past year, such as Mireille Knoll, who lived through the occupation of Paris but was murdered this year at the age of 85 in a hate crime, and Gena Turgel, who survived four concentration camps. She tended to the dying Anne Frank in Belsen, and married a British soldier just six weeks after liberation.

Lady for giving way during such a moving and powerful speech. Like her, I was extremely moved by Ms Pollack’s testimony, although that was at a Conservative party conference. Does she agree that the declining number of holocaust survivors is another reason why it is so important for their recorded testimony to have a central role in the new learning centre?

Mike Wood: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way during such a moving and powerful speech. Like her, I was extremely moved by Ms Pollack’s testimony, although that was at a Conservative party conference. Does she agree that the declining number of holocaust survivors is another reason why it is so important for their recorded testimony to have a central role in the new learning centre?

Luciana Berger: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important intervention. I have seen the testimonies that are housed at Yad Vashem. That project, which is funded in part by Steven Spielberg, has done so much to capture the stories and the background. For every single person who perished, there is a whole history and a family who have been affected up to the modern day. It is critical for those testimonies to be at the centre of every holocaust memorial, however it may be presented—in particular, the new national memorial that we are due to have—in order to have an impact on the next generation.

It is important to recognise that the holocaust did not start with gas chambers. It started with ideas, with speeches. It culminated in crematoria, but it began with words. It had its roots in the warped racial theories of the 1890s, and in conspiracy theories such as those in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The Nazis did not invent antisemitism, but they modernised it, made it the state religion, and turned an industrial state into a machine for killing every Jew in Europe.

We should ask how that happened. How was such a thing possible in a civilised European country? One answer lies in the compliance of the civilian population. In the past year we also lost the writer Primo Levi, who was in Auschwitz. He wrote:

“Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions.”

That is the aspect of the holocaust from which we need to learn the most: not the SS, who enjoyed the torture and killings, but the thousands of people in the civilian police, the railways and the civil service who never challenged what they knew to be happening, who never questioned the plans that they were helping to implement, who looked the other way. They saw those trains heading east, but they never wondered why no one ever came back, even for a day. At what point could it have been stopped? Surely the lesson for us today is that unless we challenge the words, it is much harder to challenge the deeds. We cannot be bystanders. We cannot walk by on the other side.

In the 1930s it was Der Stürmer, which ran from 1923 onwards with its unceasing antisemitism. It told its readers week after week that Jews spread disease, and the caption on every front page read “The Jews are our misfortune!” Today it is social media, with all its manifestations of modern antisemitism: Jews secretly run the banks, organised 9/11, profit from wars, manipulate the media, and have loyalties to foreign powers.

When people deny the holocaust or claim that Jews exploit it, we cannot be bystanders. When people online draw up lists of Jews in the media, we cannot be bystanders. When people use the term “Zio” or “Rothschild” instead of “Jew” to cover their racism, we cannot be bystanders. Whether it is the neo-Nazis or those who think that they belong to the left, we must say no, and call it out as loudly as we can. Every single time, it must be challenged swiftly and without favour, no matter where it rears its very ugly head.

I will end with another quote from Primo Levi:

“It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say. It can happen, and it can happen everywhere.”

1.36 pm

Theresa Villiers: No other episode in human history can match the holocaust for scale and depth of evil—an evil that sought to harness the technology of the modern world to deliver mass murder on an industrial scale, in an attempt to eliminate an entire ethnic group. The fact that it could have happened not in the distant past but in supposedly civilised 20th-century Europe still shocks me, and I still find it impossible to comprehend, so many years after I first learned the story of those terrible events. That so many people stood by when their Jewish friends and neighbours were torn from their homes and subjected to unspeakable cruelty is the most truly shocking part of that story.
However, I think we should also remember those who did not look away when Jewish people and others were being attacked and rounded up by the Nazis: the people who stepped up and saved lives, even when that put their own life and those of their families in real danger. The example that I want us to remember today is Albania.

Following the German occupation, the Albanian population, in an extraordinary act of courage, refused to comply with Nazi orders to hand over a list of Jewish people living in their country. Albanian Government agencies provided many Jewish families with fake documentation to enable them to hide in the wider population. That remarkable assistance was grounded in Besa, a code whereby it was considered a matter of national honour to help Jewish people in their time of trouble. Sanctuary was offered not only to Albanian Jewish people, but to refugees from other countries. Albania, the only country in Europe with a Muslim majority, succeeded where others failed, and at the end of the war its Jewish population was larger than it had been at the start.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Theresa Villiers: No, I will not.

As well as producing stories of horror, brutality and pain, the events that we are considering today gave rise to the heroism of ordinary people in Albania, as well as people such as Frank Foley and Nicholas Winton, the voluntary groups and church groups who made the Kindertransport possible, and so many others who gave sanctuary and shelter to Jewish people fleeing Nazi atrocity.

Let me, like other Members, pay a heartfelt tribute to holocaust survivors in my constituency. There may be others, but those of whom I am aware include Hedi Argent, Harry Jacob, Freddie Knoller and Mala Tribich. It is incredibly brave of survivors to be prepared to come forward and tell their stories—to relive those terrible years of suffering. We owe them so much for their role in explaining to successive generations the evil to which humanity can sink, and the importance of doing everything we can to make sure that this never happens again. Like others, I thank the Holocaust Educational Trust, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Government for their financial support for Holocaust education.

I have been campaigning against antisemitism for about 30 years. More or less the first day I set foot across the threshold of this building was to lobby my MP to highlight the plight of Jewish refuseniks in the Soviet Union, who were unable to practise their faith in freedom. I am sure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will remember the debate in April on antisemitism; it was one of the most moving debates I have ever been present for in this place. It was a chilling reminder that the menace of antisemitism is still with us. It is truly shocking that the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) has stated that the problem with antisemitism in Labour is now so severe that the party has passed the threshold for being deemed to be institutionally racist.

As colleagues have pointed out, this is a problem on many parts of the political spectrum, and it is completely unacceptable.

Antisemitism has mutated, taken on new forms, and gained a lethal new lease of life with social media. It has also been given new life by the militant anti-Zionism of the radical left, so today is a time for all of us to make a commitment once again to root out antisemitism wherever it emerges, and to say loud and clear that we will never, ever tolerate this vicious form of racism.

1.41 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this debate today in advance of Holocaust Memorial Day on Sunday. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) for securing the debate, with others, and for his extremely moving opening speech.

The theme this year is Torn from Home, providing the chance to think about the impact that the holocaust and genocide has on those wrenched from the place they call home for fear of threat and persecution, and I wanted, in this year in which we are urged to be louder in the face of the rise in antisemitism, to use my contribution to pay tribute to my constituent Renate Collins. I am hugely privileged to have Renate as a constituent; she is an amazing woman who works tirelessly with groups and schools and at events to share her family’s story to ensure that such things never happen again. I am very grateful to her for the work she does and would like to put her story on the record today.

Renate was one of the last children to be put on the Kindertransport which brought some 10,000 young Jewish children to Britain from Germany, Austria, the former Czechoslovakia, Poland and elsewhere. On 30 June 1939 her train was the last to leave Prague before the Nazi invasion. She was just five years old when her mother and family doctor put her on the train, her mother and father not knowing if they would see her again. Renate had a high temperature and chicken pox so her mother was reluctant to put her on the train, but the doctor said, “If you don’t put Renate on this train, she will never go.”

Renate, at just five and with her hair in pigtails, had no idea where she was going, thinking that she might have been going on holiday. Yet her two-day journey through Holland and London brought her to Porth and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). Here she lived with Reverend Fred Coppleston and his wife Arianwen and was brought up as their own. She arrived in Britain with her visa bearing a Third Reich stamp with swastika and spoke just two words of English: “yes” and “no.”

Before going, her mother helped her write letters to the family she was travelling to. With the innocence only a child could have in such grave circumstances, she had written to the Welsh family:

“I hope there is no spinach in England. But I do hope there are many ice creams over there as I am terribly fond of it, and can be, throughout a whole day, the best girl in the world if I get plenty of it...I am thanking you for all you are going to do for me, and I will be a very good child to you.”

In a letter Renate still has that her mother sent to the reverend and his wife she had written:

“I am thanking you for your beautiful and helpful letter. I would call myself happy to know my little one in a surrounding of so much affection and love.”
Tragically, both her mother and father were killed by the Nazis. In total, Renate lost 64 family members in the Holocaust. Renate surviving because of the decisions her parents made 79 years ago. Over the last year Renate has discovered new information about the deaths of some of her closest relatives,冷冷ly murdered in the open air by guards when their train to Treblinka was held up in bad weather.

I really wanted to get Renate’s story on record today because it is so important that we remember the families, the homes and lives torn apart, the children who never saw their family again, and the dangers and devastating consequences of racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism.

Renate is an absolutely brilliant woman and she keeps going because, as she has always told me, this extreme hatred and intolerance can always “raise its ugly head again.” The importance of Holocaust Memorial Day is that we learn these lessons and act to never see it repeated.

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech, and I would like to pay tribute to somebody who used to sit here on these Benches who has a similar story: Lord Dubs. He also came here on the Kindertransport, and this year’s theme of Torn from Home is very apt, because he has done so much work for modern-day refugees and to bring modern-day children to this country. We should recognise his work and all he has done.

Jessica Morden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I join other hon. Members in paying tribute to the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. I also pay tribute to Renate and her family and to her continued commitment to educating and informing people about what she and millions of others went through within our lifetimes, as nothing can compare to the testimony of survivors.

1.45 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Today we rightly remember the victims of the Holocaust. As many colleagues have said in several moving speeches, mourning is not enough to honour their memory. Holocaust Memorial Day should serve to re-energise our efforts to address mass atrocities wherever and whenever they occur, and to challenge us to do all we can to prevent future genocides from occurring.

Has the international community done enough in this regard in the last 70 years? Sadly, it has done nothing like enough. The UN convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide had its 70th anniversary on 9 December 2018. It is the first international document to define the crime of genocide and to impose obligations on states to prevent and punish it. The crime is defined as the crime above all crimes and as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.

But, tragically, the last 70 years have been an era of genocidal crimes: Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur in Sudan, Syria, Iraq and more recently Burma — and even today there are fears of this in Nigeria.

We should ask ourselves what has gone wrong when after each fresh atrocity we say, “Never again.” Why have we not, both here in the UK and in the international community, worked harder to implement an effective atrocity prevention strategy, rather than simply hoping that genocides will not cyclically reoccur?

Over recent years we have missed too many early signs of mass atrocities—too many red flags. These red flags are of the type that my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) talked about with regard to Rwanda—the encouraging of children in Rwanda to call those of another group “cockroaches.” There were also red flags in Syria. In 2014 Daesh was committing mass atrocities in Syria and Iraq, but that was not the beginning; it is now clear that the persecution of Christians in Iraq probably began a decade earlier, and it was recorded in UNHCR documents. Similarly, the genocidal campaign in Burma against the Rohingya Muslims was the culmination of clear and consistent ethnic and religious persecution over many years before it began to be recognised in 2016.

The failure to recognise these red flags has meant we have consistently failed to call genocides by their name. Following the self-declared genocidal actions of Daesh in 2014 to 2017, UN convention signatories have failed still to declare it a genocide, have failed to collect court-worthy evidence of atrocities, and have failed to prosecute perpetrators. That is despite many Parliaments, including this House of Commons, recognising those events as a clear and obvious genocide. We voted by 278 votes to nil about two years ago to recognise that.

Unfortunately, our Government have consistently relied on their long-standing policy of leaving the question of genocide determination for international judicial systems, but that is not good enough, because there is not an effective international judicial system to consider these situations.

I suggest that, in order to address that, we look again at the Genocide Determination Bill, which Lord Alton introduced in the Lords and which I have introduced in the Commons during this Session. It aims to give the power to the High Court to make a preliminary finding on cases of alleged genocide, and to enable the subsequent referral of such findings to the International Criminal Court or a special United Nations tribunal. Without such a mechanism, and in the continuing absence of Government referrals, I fear that we will continue to see no prosecutions for UK nationals committing genocide.

There are some signs of hope, however. The Foreign Secretary’s recently announced independent review of the global persecution of Christians has been warmly welcomed, and Lord Alton’s call for an ad hoc inquiry in the House of Lords into the fulfilment of the UK’s obligations flowing from the UN convention is encouraging. Lastly, the UK-Iraqi UN Security Council resolution 2379 has provided a welcome, if overdue, beginning for evidence collection and the potential prosecution of Daesh crimes.

1.50 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on securing this debate. It is important that we mark this day so that we and future generations remember the atrocities that happened during the second world war and that have occurred in genocides since. I note that this year marks the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda and the 40th anniversary of the end of the
genocide in Cambodia. I have always had an interest in the holocaust, having written my dissertation on the subject, and I am constantly shocked and saddened as I continue to read about the events that happened during that terrible time. I spent Christmas reading Primo Levi.

As many other hon. Members have shared, the theme for this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is Torn from Home, exploring what it means to be taken from a place of safety and the trauma of the loss. It is important to reflect on the personal and emotive feelings that are generated when we try to imagine what it must be like no longer to have a place of safety or security to call home, and to live with the constant threat of violence and fear of the unknown. One of the most famous accounts of being torn from home during the holocaust is Anne Frank’s diary, which shares her family’s story of finding an alternative home. This is an extract from her diary, from 11 July 1942:

“I don’t think I’ll ever feel at home in this house, but that doesn’t mean I hate it. It’s more like being on holiday in some strange pension. Kind of an odd way to look at life in hiding, but that’s how things are.”

The diary abruptly ends on 1 August 1944, three days before her family were discovered in their secret annexe and torn from their place of safety. As Members will all be aware, Anne Frank was only a child and tragically lost her life at just 15 years old. In her diary, she describes how she felt as a child in hiding, saying:

“It’s utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death.”

I find it particularly difficult to comprehend the fate of children in the holocaust. Many Members will be aware that I have spent a lot of my time campaigning in Parliament for the rights of children, and when I read about the experiences of children in concentration camps, it truly breaks my heart. I understand that around 1.5 million children died in the holocaust—a number too great even to comprehend.

Carolyn Harris: I most certainly do agree with my hon. Friend. I would love to visit Auschwitz, but my own personal tragedy—my son would have been 38 today—has prevented me from doing so. I intend to rectify that, however, and I hope to go there this year.

Young children were particularly vulnerable and were often sent immediately to the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau. One of the reasons for this was that, along with the elderly, children were unable to participate in forced labour in the camps. That was why so many lost their lives. As well as more than 1 million Jewish children being killed, tens of thousands of Romany children, German children with physical and mental disabilities living in institutions and Polish children lost their lives.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like a

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. I visited Auschwitz with the Holocaust Educational Trust in 2016, along with local students from my area, who were immeasurably moved by the experience. Does she agree that that is an incredibly powerful place to take schoolchildren if we are to teach future generations that we must all say, “Never again”?

Carolyn Harris: I most certainly do agree with my hon. Friend. It has been estimated that only 6% to 11% of Europe’s pre-war Jewish population of children survived, compared with 33% of the adults. Some of those who survived the holocaust have gone on to share their experiences of being a child in a concentration camp, and Gerda Weissmann Klein is one such survivor. She has described how she celebrated her birthday in the ghetto and how her mother had gifted her an orange on her birthday. Her mother got that orange by giving up a diamond and pearl ring in exchange for the piece of fruit. Every mother, and every parent, in this place will know that we are prepared to make any sacrifice for our children. That was the last birthday present Gerda ever received from her parents.

Gerda’s experience was unfortunately shared by many survivors of the holocaust, who have gone on to tell the heartbreaking stories of their time in the concentration camps. We must never forget those stories. They must continue to be told so that we can learn the lessons for a safer future. Holocaust Memorial Day offers an opportunity for us all to take the time to stop and reflect on the dreadful acts that occurred all those years ago, and it is vital that we take these opportunities to listen to the stories and to individuals’ experiences of being torn from home, so that we can work to make the future safer for all.

1.56 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), and indeed all the Members who have spoken so movingly today. The holocaust is a subject that is difficult to approach. It is tough to find the right words, but it is even more difficult knowing that this is not some distant event that is completely removed from how we conduct ourselves today. Even with the effects still so prevalent, antisemitism continues to raise its ugly head and is trying to infect the political mainstream once again.

For Holocaust Memorial Day this year, Parliament will play host next Monday to the production of “PUSH”, a holocaust opera that was first performed in Chichester Cathedral to mark last year’s Holocaust Memorial Day. The performance centres on the true story of Simon Gronowski, who, as the title suggests, was quite literally pushed from a moving train by his mother in Belgium in 1943. That train was destined for the Auschwitz concentration camp, and Simon was one of the 1,631 Jews selected for transportation to the gas chambers that day. It was only through the actions of three brave resistance fighters that the train transporting Simon was halted en route. That was the only time that the transportation train was stopped on its way to a concentration camp, and 223 people tried to escape the train, although only 108 were successful. They included Simon, thanks to
the courageous actions of his mother. Both she and Simon’s sister, Ita, stayed on the train, and they died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

We will have the honour and privilege of welcoming Simon to the House when Howard Moody and his choir put on their production next Monday in Speaker’s House. Members, peers and rabbis have been invited to come and watch the production, and it is particularly apt that the theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is Torn from Home. I would like to pay tribute to the Chichester marks Holocaust Memorial Day Committee, particularly Councillor Martyn Bell, the mayor, and Councillor Clare Apel, who have helped to put the production together.

Listening to Simon’s story, and his interviews, we cannot help but be inspired by his faith in the goodness of humanity. In the years that followed the war, the collaborator who put him and his family on that train was racked with guilt. As he lay on his deathbed, he asked Simon for his forgiveness, and in an act of astonishing humanity, Simon forgave him. The holocaust has shown the darkest, crulest aspects of the human character. I saw this for myself when I visited Yad Vashem. I was so moved by the actions of complete strangers who had risked their own lives to keep Jewish people safe from the Nazis and who are remembered there.

The mass graves of Auschwitz and the other concentration camps marked the end of a gradual process. The holocaust did not begin with the gas chambers; it started with the legitimisation of antisemitism in mainstream debate. It was instigated by making “different” wrong. The fact that Dr Joseph Goebbels and the other Nazis were able to spin lies and manipulate fact to legitimise their racist, tyrannical agenda should serve as a warning to us all today. The Nazis learned how to make the most of the new media capability of the day—the radio—and that is happening again. In so many ways, the advent of fake news on social media platforms today is a chilling echo of how a lie can be halfway around the world before the truth has its shoes on.

The holocaust began with hate speeches and radio broadcasts, but it then developed into legal discrimination against Jewish people through the so-called Nuremberg laws. Permission was given for violence to be visited on Jewish minorities across Europe. It was incentivised by the Nazis, who offered rewards for betraying Jews in hiding and then stole their property. It ended with the final solution: the gas chambers of the concentration camps.

We in the Chamber today have something that Jewish people and other minorities did not have during that period: a voice. We must use it and retell their stories to people and other minorities did not have during that period: a voice. We must use it and retell their stories to ensure that this tragedy never happens again. We will also remember that much of the antisemitic hatred that preceded the holocaust was directed against poor Jewish immigrants from Russia, Poland and the other countries of eastern Europe and that that hatred was present not only in Germany, but in France and here in the United Kingdom. We must remember that at the core of so much of the hatred that prepared the ground for the holocaust was the idea that Jews were alien and could never truly be German, French or English. We must commit to fighting that invidious and corrupting lie wherever it raises its head.

Alex Sobel: On that point, I spoke in last year’s Holocaust Memorial Day debate and the footage was put on Channel 4’s Facebook page, where I was accused of all those things that my hon. Friend mentions. People said that I was a fifth columnist, that I was not fit to sit in the British Parliament and that I was not properly British. That is exactly what my hon. Friend is talking about, and we need to fight against it.

Chi Onwurah: I agree with my hon. Friend that such lies must be called out whenever they are heard. As my Jewish constituents have made clear, the terror of the holocaust does not fade for our Jewish communities. Incidents that may seem marginal and inconsequential to some are experienced from the point of view of survivors and their children and grandchildren as harbingers of horrors too awful to think about. Fear echoes down the generations while many of us go about our business feeling safe and secure. Recent studies have revealed the degree to which the first antisemitic legislation passed by the Nazi party was modelled on the racist laws of the American south and of British colonies such as South Africa. Remembrance must mean eternal vigilance against the politics of hatred and dehumanisation and the recognition that they do not make their first appearance as mass murder, but as a climate of religious or racial intolerance and political expediency.

Nowhere is that recognition more important than in discussions about the middle east. Those of us who support the cause of Palestinian rights must recognise that we see antisemitic ideas surface time and again in debates over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There must be zero tolerance of antisemitism in such debates, just as there must be space for an honest appraisal of the actual issues and behaviours of those involved in the conflict.

There must be zero tolerance within the Labour party, too. I am sad to report that Jewish constituents have told me that they no longer feel welcome in our party. I have written to and met both our leader and our general secretary to discuss the matter, and I have also met representatives of Jewish groups in Newcastle and nationally. I have been assured that the party is developing policies and allocating appropriate resources that will provide demonstrable evidence that we are committed to rooting out antisemitism. Antisemitism cases will be heard more quickly and the backlog cleared, and anyone using antisemitic tropes must be called out and subject to appropriate sanction.
However, we also need appropriate educational resources to help Members understand the history of antisemitism and antisemitic tropes, ensuring that we can express a wide range of views, particularly on Palestine and Israel, without implying any antisemitic views, either directly or indirectly. I have been assured that that will be developed and delivered soon.

In the party, in Newcastle and in the country, the holocaust must be remembered in words and in deeds.

2.6 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): On 27 April 1993, I stooped to pick up what I thought was a black rubber ball. I put it in my hand, looked at it and then dropped it in horror. I had picked up the blackened, burnt head of a baby. I was horrified and guilty. The day before, I found a whole family—a father, a mother, a boy and a girl—lying where they had been shot. From the way the bodies were arranged, it looked as though the little girl had been shot while holding her puppy. The same bullet had killed them both.

I was the British UN commander in Bosnia at the time, and my men were horrified. We took more than 104 bodies, mainly women and children, to a place called Vitez, where we dug a big pit in which to place the bodies. Someone said, “Take them out of the bags,” because we had put them into our body bags, which an infantry battalion always carries. “You cannot bury bodies in plastic,” we were told. One of my men said to me, “This is 1993, not 1943. This is genocide again.” And it was.

The Jewish genocide during the second world war, when two thirds of the Jews of Europe were destroyed by the Nazis, was appalling, but genocide’s shadow continues. We have heard about Cambodia, where between 10% and 30% of the population were murdered by Pol Pot. We have heard about Rwanda, where one million people were killed. We have heard about Bosnia, where 3% of the Muslim population was killed—most notably and horrifically when 8,373 men and boys were killed at Srebrenica in July 1995. Myanmar continues. So, too, does the genocide of the Yazidis in Syria and Iraq.

We still have this scourge in the world, and I believe that is what the Holocaust Educational Trust is all about. Goodness me, what is it that allows a man—it is normally men, not women—to do this? Sometimes it is the society they live in, sometimes it is custom, sometimes it is greed and sometimes it is because they are wearing a uniform. None of the massacres we have talked about today were carried out by civilians. Uniforms can encourage people to behave disgustingly.

I believe that the purpose of our debate today is to try to stop genocide happening again, and the way we can do that is by action. We sit in a cosy, warm Chamber, and we all say how disgusting genocide is and how appalling it is that it has happened. What can we do about it? Well, take it from me, there is only one way to stop genocide and that is to get in among the people who are doing it and stop it. Sometimes that requires us to be brave with our armed forces and with our police. Words work, but action to stop genocide requires men and women to go in there and run risks to stop murder, just like the individuals we have discussed today.
Antisemitism was never an issue in the over 20 years that I worked as a doctor, but it has been since the year I was elected.

The presence of that list online caused me to be called to a local meeting in 2015, which I attended with my husband and children. The list was brought up on a computer screen, and I was challenged about it. Others were as surprised as I was that that had happened, but no concern was raised about the impact it might have on me, my security or that of my children. The only concern was that people thought and were saying that I was a Zionist and an agent of Israel.

As recently as last year, individuals tried to prevent me from marking world war two and attending a Remembrance Sunday service by calling a meeting at the same time and then pretending not to know it was Remembrance Sunday. I was the only local MP to be treated in such a way. Never did I think that I would be repeatedly excluded from local meetings or from speaking at scheduled events, but I do not mention those issues for myself, because I am thankful for the support of my party and its Westminster leader. These issues make me very concerned about the way ahead in UK politics.

The message of the Holocaust Educational Trust is to “speak louder,” which can be difficult because antisemites want to silence victims. Those who speak out are frightened of being targeted, but we must take courage and speak louder. We must support all those who come forward. Remembering means that we never turn away, from, minimise, ignore or condone antisemitism.

2.17 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who made such a moving contribution.

Contemplating the systematic murder of 6 million people is beyond credibility, so the brilliant work of the Holocaust Educational Trust to highlight the testimony of survivors and the stories they have told is critical. I pay tribute to the fact that it educates 120,000 people every year about the awful horrors of the holocaust.

I pay tribute to holocaust survivors in my constituency, including Eve Glicksman, Henri Ostfeld and Herman Hirschberger, who all regularly go out to schools, despite being of advanced age, to bear testament to what happened during the holocaust.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) mentioned my late constituent Gena Turgel, who became her husband six months later. Gena and her husband moved to the United Kingdom, which she made her home and where she brought her family—her children and grandchildren. She wrote a book called “I Light a Candle”. Her light has gone out, but it will survive for ever.

I am very pleased that the Lessons from Auschwitz project involved Park High School, Canons High School and Bentley Wood High School in 2018. No one who attended the Holocaust Educational Trust reception recently could have failed to be moved by the testimony of the survivors.

I want to end by saying that I think there is real hope. Yasmin Mohamed, a student at Canons High School and a Holocaust Educational Trust ambassador, commented after the reception that she had “seen first-hand where antisemitism, intolerance and hatred has led in the past and I’m now committed to ensuring that the Holocaust is never forgotten. I want to ensure that we learn from the past so that we can build a better future.”

I am pleased that we will soon witness the Holocaust memorial centre close to Parliament so that we can educate young people and have a memorial to the victims of this terrible disaster. The planning application was submitted in December 2018 and the site, as we well know, is Victoria Tower Gardens. I am pleased to be the co-chair, together with my friend the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), of the all-party group that is going to see that come to fruition.

2.22 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) said in his terribly moving speech, this year’s theme for Holocaust Memorial Day is Torn from Home. As we all know, homes are much more than physical dwellings; they are everything that sustains us. They are our comfort, our security, our family, our friends, our community and our faith. They are the structure that helps us to live rich and meaningful human lives. Home is part of our identity; it is who we are. That is why being torn from home is so utterly traumatic.

Through the 1930s, everything that makes a place a home was stripped away from Jewish people, in Germany and then throughout Europe. It was a gradual, harrowing experience. In ‘33, the Nazi Government began the creeping exclusion of Jewish people from public life. Jewish people were no longer protected by the police or courts, and kosher meat was banned. In ‘34, Jews were barred from military service, banned from becoming doctors or lawyers and even prevented from being accountants and actors. In ‘35, the infamous Nuremberg laws defined Jewish Germans as non-citizens, depriving...
them of their rights to vote and stand for public office, and legally condemning relationships between Jewish Germans and their non-Jewish neighbours.

Jewish Germans witnessed the destruction of their home with horror. One of them was John Fink, from Berlin. He said:

“The Nazis knew how to torture us...Every few weeks...other laws came. We had...to move...to a so-called ‘Jewish House’ which the Nazis controlled.”

What a terrible demonstration of the difference between a house and a home. The marked-out houses and ghettos were a permanent reminder that John, his family and so many others were now homeless.

The trauma of being torn from home is powerfully illustrated by the story of the St Louis, which sailed on 13 May 1939, carrying 937 passengers towards Cuba. Almost all were Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. They had paid the Cuban authorities for their landing cards, but they were turned away on arrival at Havana. The ship anchored there for a week, and then crawled north past Florida. The passengers came close enough to see the lights, but the USA refused them.

Liane Reif-Lehrer, who was only a child at the time, said to a journalist some 50 years later:

“I think it’s...a symbol of what happened. The German government...were trying to show the world that nobody...wanted us”.

And did they not succeed? The Jews were not just made homeless in Germany; they were portrayed as universally homeless—abandoned by everyone and a threat to the homes of all. Being put in that position must have been terrifying. The passengers on board the St Louis knew what they were going back to in Germany. They knew what it would mean to return, even if they did not yet know the sickening scale of the holocaust.

One passenger, Max Loewe, had already been to a concentration camp, and the trauma had completely damaged his mind. He must have felt as though nobody in this world would help him, and the Nazi threat—the terror he had experienced at first hand—was growing all the time. As the boat lingered near Havana, Max became increasingly terrified, believing that there were SS officers on board searching for him. He cut his wrists and jumped overboard into the water where, in full view of all the other passengers, he writhed and screamed. He ended up in a Cuban hospital, but his wife and daughter were not even allowed to leave the ship. He must have felt as though, with no help coming, the only escape for him would be death.

In the wake of America’s refusal to provide refuge, Britain was one of the four states who agreed to take in some of the passengers in, and 288 of them, including 13 May ‘39, carrying 937 passengers towards Cuba. Most of all the other passengers, he writhed and screamed. He ended up in a Cuban hospital, but his wife and daughter were not included 288 of them, including 13 May ‘39, carrying 937 passengers towards Cuba. Almost all were Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. They had paid the Cuban authorities for their landing cards, but they were turned away on arrival at Havana. The ship anchored there for a week, and then crawled north past Florida. The passengers came close enough to see the lights, but the USA refused them.

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We must individually live out our commitment and “the better angels of our nature.”

We must always remember what happens when we do not upholding the universal human right of individual agency—these are the values that elevate our common humanity. We must always remember what happens when we do not listen to what Abraham Lincoln described as “the better angels of our nature.”

We must individually live out our commitment and prayer of never again.

2.32 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What a privilege it is to have heard the speeches we have all listened to.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I wonder whether I might crave your indulgence and that of the Chamber and share an anecdote—a memory. Thirty-two years ago I was, believe it or not—it was a long time ago—the youngest councillor in Ross and Cromarty in the highlands. In those days, the link between the arts and local government was not particularly there to be seen, but we had a very forward-looking chief executive called Douglas Sinclair, who is sadly no longer with us. He really did catapult Ross and Cromarty into having a really enlightened arts policy.

He was a great supporter of the Labour party. I put that on the record with some pleasure, because a man like that deserves to be remembered in Hansard.

Mr Douglas Sinclair got Julian Lloyd Webber to come and play in my hometown of Tain. He got in place a writer in residence and a poet in residence, and the arts flourished in the far north of Scotland. I particularly remember one cold winter’s night, when we were bidden through to a concert in the town hall in Dingwall, the county town of Ross and Cromarty. When we sat down, the first thing I noticed was that there were two Mozart piano concertos on the programme, but for some reason the old upright piano in the town hall had not been exchanged for a rather more splendid grand. The upright piano had probably only ever had “Chopsticks” played on it for the previous 20 years. Nevertheless, in came the orchestra. If my memory serves me rightly, they were called the International Orchestra of New York, and they played with considerable verve. The poor old upright piano did not know what had hit it; moths came out of the top and we thought the sides were going to fall off. They dropped the odd note and the odd chord was wrong, but by gosh they put their hearts into it.

At the interval—it is not the way in the highlands to have posh glasses of champagne as they do in London or these splendid places down here; in the highlands we have egg sandwiches, shortbread and tea—the whole audience mixed with the orchestra. Within minutes of my talking to the orchestra—you can guess what is coming, Mr Deputy Speaker—it became apparent that they were survivors of the camps. They told me that they had played for their lives in the camps, and now they were playing for us as a celebration of life. One of them rolled up his sleeve—he was wearing white tie—and showed me his tattoo. In those short minutes over our eats and our tea, we were all moved by these people being with us, and having come to the north of Scotland.

When we sat down again for the second piano concerto, which I remember very well was Mozart’s 23rd, we hung on every note. Every mistake—they were rather elderly—was ignored. We cheered them to the rafters when they sat down at the end of the last movement and we encored them furiously. Somehow, our enthusiasm caught on with them and they responded. That piano has never since recovered.

That is my anecdote. In just one event in my life, the very people who had survived were there, and that brought home to me, more than anything else probably could have done, what the Holocaust was. Those good people are probably no longer with us, because it was a long time ago and they were elderly then, but that is my memory, and it serves me strongly when it comes to remembering, as we shall do, the horrors of the Holocaust, and never forgetting. I tell you this, Mr Deputy Speaker: I cannot listen to Mozart’s beautiful 23rd piano concerto without remembering those good, noble and brave people.

2.36 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It really is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). I, too, shall speak to the House about one of my experiences.

On Sunday, I attended the funeral service at Bushey new cemetery. It was significant because it was the first and only interment of victims of the Holocaust ever to take place in the United Kingdom. It is remarkable that such a ceremony should take place more than 70 years after the death camps were discovered. The remains were originally given to the Imperial War Museum many years ago. They were acknowledged by a pathologist to be the remains of six people—five adults and one child—and because they were never going to be put on display, it was decided that they should be buried. That was certainly the appropriate decision.

I pay tribute to the Imperial War Museum for its efforts in seeking a resting place for these people. Such decisions are really outside most curators’ experience, but having established that the remains did come from Jewish people at Auschwitz-Birkenau, they took action. The museum contacted the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, and they collaborated and decided that the remains should be interred at the cemetery at Bushey.

As with any funeral, I was not actually invited, but I decided to attend because I have several Holocaust survivors in my constituency—and, indeed, the Holocaust Survivors Centre. Not knowing how many people would turn up, I arrived in plenty of time, and as I travelled along the road, I realised that it was quite an important event. Unknown to me, in attendance were the Archbishop of Westminster, Israel’s ambassador, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government,
Baron Pickles, and Lord-Lieutenant Robert Voss as a representative of the Queen. I add, I saw many hundreds of my constituents. I understand that more than 1,200 people attended.

The address given by the Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis—who happens to be my constituent—moved many people to tears. I watched as several men carefully wiped their eyes when the Chief Rabbi spoke personally to the infant among the six. He said:

“Your childhood was robbed. You experienced such fear and dread, then the ultimate wickedness saw your life taken. We don’t know who you are, your name, if you were male or female or the details of your family. But we do know you were Jewish. All of us here feel a strong connection to you.”

One of my constituents, about whom I have spoken in previous debates, made an impact on me again on that day. I often visit her to eat her home-made cake, and I like to ensure that she is doing okay. I was proud when I saw her at the service on Sunday and witnessed her and other Holocaust survivors accompanying the coffin to the grave. Zigi Shipper, Harry Bibring, Renee Salt and Agnes Grunwald-Spier all placed their hands on the coffin’s blue velvet covering as they walked to where the remains were to be buried in earth brought over from Israel.

As prayers were said and the coffin lowered, people were invited to come forward to place earth in the grave. With such a large crowd, it did not take long for the space to be filled. What struck me as I stood by the graveside was the number of people who held pictures and artefacts of relatives whom I presume were victims of the Holocaust. For them, the funeral was very real, and it cannot be said definitively whether or not the grave contained one of their relatives. We will never know. In so many ways, these six people represent the millions who do not have a last resting place, and whose families, friends and relatives cannot mourn them because they do not know what happened to them.

As I turned away, someone indicated a small bag of earth that I should place it on the grave, which I did. We undertake many activities as Members of Parliament, but this event was something completely different, and something I will not forget. At the Barnet Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony, we have heard from many speakers over the years, talking about atrocities in Rwanda, Cambodia and other countries, in addition to many local people whose lives have been directly or indirectly affected by the Holocaust. For me, the event has become more personal, particularly this year, as I have had direct contact not just with the survivors, but now with the dead.

2.40 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): No words—certainly none that I have—can describe adequately the horror of the Holocaust, the attempt to wipe out the Jewish population of Europe, the killing of Roma, gay people, trade unionists and many other victims of Nazi ideology. As this debate has shown over the last couple of hours, what brings it home are the human stories showing how real it was on an individual level. A life is a life.

Like many Members of this House on all sides, tomorrow I will take part in commemoration events for Holocaust Memorial Day, one in Wolverhampton and one in Dudley. I pay tribute not only to the wonderful and moving opening speech today but to the tremendous work over a longer period of my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin). Year after year, he has organised a very moving and well-attended event in his constituency aimed at teaching today’s young generation about the horrors of the past. He has spoken up bravely against antisemitism and alongside a number of my hon. Friends has stood up for the best of what my party should stand for at a time when sadly that has not always been easy.

I also pay tribute to the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. These organisations do amazing work. The latter records the testimony of those who survived, arranges speakers in schools and enables pupils to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau in what is a life-changing experience for them. I am pleased to say that schools in my constituency—Colton Hills, Moseley Park, the Ormiston SWB Academy and the Royal Wolverhampton School—have all taken part in the past year. These events are valuable and important. They not only benefit those who take part directly but allow students to share the experience with others. Most of all, they show to a new generation the terrible and appalling consequences of where race hatred and the demonisation of those who are different can lead. I am pleased that support for the Holocaust Educational Trust is bipartisan and has survived several changes of Government. Long may that continue.

This is also a moment to reflect on our own politics. It is estimated that 70,000 refugees came to the UK from the rest of Europe in the years running up to the war, including children saved through the Kindertransport programme. Yes, the UK could have done more during the war, but surely today we have to ask questions about our own debate on refugees. It has become too easy to talk about refugees in a way that strips them of their humanity and ascribes to them some darker, ulterior motive, and it has become too easy to say they should go anywhere but here. No one has done more to emphasise the common humanity of refugees than our colleague Lord Alf Dubs, himself a child of the Kindertransport. He is an inspiration to Members of this House, is not only unacceptable in itself but a warning of what happens when people ascribe great virtue to themselves and those who agree with them but show a closed and hostile mind to others, when people have a hierarchy of victimhood, where some are allowed to be victims but others are not. These are the permission slips for cruelty that have so scarred our politics and allowed hatred to grow. As we mark Holocaust Memorial Day, let us remember the common value of humanity. A life is a life, no matter a person’s colour, background, wealth or whatever else, and each life must be valued. That is the lesson of the events we mark this weekend.

2.45 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The opening speech by the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) in this important debate was powerful, moving and
appropriate. He is not only a colleague in this place but a friend, and he really did set the tone for all the speeches that followed. This has been an important and beneficial debate, as I hope will be recognised by people outside viewing it.

I, too, believe that it is fitting that the UK have a national memorial here in the Borough of Westminster, and I hope it comes to fruition soon. I have had the privilege of visiting the national Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. This moving and poignant memorial gives immense hope in reminding us of the strength of character amidst the hellish loss that people suffered. I hope that our national memorial will be similarly powerful.

As we have heard, the Holocaust is to be commemorated all over the UK. I am pleased that this evening in Belfast’s city hall politicians and community leaders from Northern Ireland will come together to mark this moment. Northern Ireland is an exceptional community with a very strong connection to the Jewish community. To name just one, Chaim Herzog, the sixth President of Israel, was born in Belfast to the Chief Rabbi of Ireland. As many will know who follow Israeli politics, he played an amazing role. His son, who now works for the Jewish Agency for Israel, was a political leader in his own right, and recently his entire family came to Belfast and celebrated Chaim’s contribution to the state of Israel and his connection to our city. It was hugely inspiring. We love to see that connection brought alive.

In last year’s debate, I suggested that No. 10 honour the Holocaust Educational Trust’s young ambassadors by inviting them to a reception at No. 10. The Minister responded very positively on the day, and I am delighted this week to have received a letter from the Prime Minister that reads:

“A reception is absolutely one option we are considering, but we are also looking at other ways in which we can support the work in the coming months”.

Those young people will be inspired and encouraged by the fact that their work is marked by the Prime Minister of our nation. Those young ambassadors do an amazing job, and I encourage the Holocaust Educational Trust, led unwaveringly by Ms Pollock, to continue with the work that it is doing.

Northern Ireland was the last part of the kingdom to benefit from the Holocaust Educational Trust work, not because there was any lack on our part, but, sad to say, because of political disagreement. I am delighted that that was righted in 2016 when the two Government Departments came together, led by Ministers from my own party, and put in place the funding to allow for the trust’s “Lessons learned” programme to be extended to Northern Ireland. It is sad that some misguided people think that that is some sort of front for something else and do not recognise how significantly important it is to put that programme in place for our young people.

I am delighted that the Government are extending that programme to our universities. I note once again on the letter that I received from the Prime Minister that a further £6 million of continued funding will go into the “Lessons from Auschwitz” programme, which will be extended to university students. I would love it to be extended to Queen’s University and the University of Ulster. The first time that many young people in Northern Ireland come together in our divided community is, sad to say, when they get to university. I hope that the programme will be extended there to encourage our young people at university. We need that programme; I am encouraged by it and I welcome this debate.

2.50 pm
Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is my pleasure to take part in this very important debate and to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) for his very eloquent and moving introduction.

As we have heard, the theme of Holocaust Memorial Day this year is Torn from Home. I want to talk about this in the context of the genocide in Rwanda, which took place in 1994.

Last year, it was my privilege to lead a parliamentary delegation on a visit to Rwanda facilitated by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. We were privileged to visit the Kigali Genocide Memorial and museum, which is run by the Aegis Trust, a British organisation based in Newark, which has worked with the Rwandans in creating a permanent memorial to the 1 million Hutus who lost their lives in the 100 days of genocide following decades of tension between Hutus and Tutsis.

The tension came to a head when the President’s plane was shot down and extremist Hutu leaders blamed the Tutsis for killing the President, which led to genocide on a colossal scale, with Hutu civilians being told that it was their duty to wipe out the Tutsis. The state provided support for the massacres, which were carried out by civilian death squads, with local officials assisting in rounding up victims and making places available for slaughter. Even churches and places of worship were used—nothing was sacrosanct. Neighbour turned on neighbour, friend on friend, and relative on relative.

One of the most moving and disturbing parts of the memorial museum for me were the stories told of the children who were killed in the massacre. There were small children, babies and toddlers. Their short lives were chronicled: their likes, their dislikes and their favourite activities. Following this simple account of the normal things that children like to do and are preoccupied with came the violent manner of their death—attacked by machetes and clubs and thrown against walls. I defy anyone to visit that museum and not to come out thinking in a different way: it is one of the most shocking and humbling experiences that I have ever had.

It seems impossible to think that, out of this madness and inhumanity, anything good would ever come out of that country again, but, miraculously, Rwanda is in the process of rebuilding itself as a vibrant and rapidly developing place, which pays due respect to its traumatic past, and, most importantly, learns the lessons from it.

On our visit, we were immensely privileged to visit the Bugesera district. We were made welcome at the Village of Unity and Reconciliation where both survivors and perpetrators of the genocide live together, working together for peace and reconciliation. We heard incredibly moving personal testimonies from the villagers, which included a great deal of forgiveness and understanding and even marriages taking place between perpetrators and survivors. The villagers explained to us that survivors and perpetrators, finding themselves homeless, simply got together and started making bricks. With the help of a faith-based organisation, Prison Fellowship Rwanda, those bricks were used to build the houses, and the Village of Unity and Reconciliation was born.
One perpetrator explained how he had been poisoned by the venomous propaganda of the genocidal regime, which had convinced him that his Tutsi neighbours were his No. 1 enemy and did not deserve a place in the world. He said that the thought of having to go back to his village once he had served his sentence and live side by side with people whose loved ones he had killed was almost unbearable. Yet he was pardoned by the survivors and now lives in harmony alongside them, with his son marrying the daughter of the family whom he had killed in what he described as an astounding sign of our reconciliation.

Although those people were torn from their homes by the genocide and had loved ones and friends torn from their lives, it was amazing to see them rebuilding their lives together and finding their home again. For me, it was all summed up by one villager who said that they saw themselves no longer as Hutus and Tutsis, but just as Rwandans. Rwanda shows that, out of the madness of genocide and man’s inhumanity to man, people can come together, can forgive but never forget, and can work together as neighbours to ensure that these shocking and dreadful events are never allowed to happen again.

As Nelson Mandela said:

“It always seems impossible until it’s done.”

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who made a powerful speech reflecting on her experiences in Rwanda. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) intends to speak about that later.

I have found being a Member of this place quite difficult over the past few weeks and months, given how incredibly divided we are and the volatile atmosphere, so it has been a refreshing change to see such consensus across the Chamber today, albeit for a debate on a very sad subject. If we conducted all our debates in such an atmosphere, we would probably be in a position that was a hell of a lot better. I particularly appreciated the thought-provoking speech made by the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). It is certainly something I will consider next Monday, when we return for what I expect will be another volatile week.

I think that we all agree that on this, the 74th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration and death camps, it is more important than ever, particularly given the dwindling number of holocaust survivors, to take this opportunity to reflect not only on that awful atrocity, but on other genocides. That is why it is so important to place on the record our thanks to the Holocaust Educational Trust for its work in all our constituencies. In Scotland, over 5,000 pupils and teachers have had the opportunity to benefit from the “Lessons from Auschwitz” project, and I know that a number of Members have had an opportunity to take part in that. Many years ago, when I was a researcher in this place, John Mason, one of my predecessors, visited Auschwitz, and I remember that we could tell how incredibly moved he had been. I think that anybody who has been to Auschwitz has had that experience.

I also want to stand up today and make sure that the Jewish community in Scotland know how safe they should feel in our country. There is no doubt that in this country the Jewish community have had to endure some utterly despicable behaviour, and hon. Members have placed some of that on the record today. A number of years ago I had the great fortune to attend the Garnethill synagogue in Glasgow, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss)—she and I both attended—and to look at some of the Jewish archives. It comes back to education, because it was only then that I began to learn about one of my predecessors, Myer Galpern, who was the Member for Glasgow, Shettleston from 1959 to 1979. In fact, he was a Deputy Speaker of the House from 1975 to 1979. Myer Galpern was not only the first Jewish Lord Provost of Glasgow, but the first Jewish provost in Scotland. I think that it is really important that I, as one of the youngest Members of the House, put that on the record today, to make sure that we never forget the contribution of the Jewish community, not just then but now, and that we embrace them and show them how much a part of our community they are.

I want, in my capacity as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on British Jews, to make some reference to current events, particularly in Hungary. I do not believe that the UK Government have done enough to confront the Hungarian Government about their state-sponsored antisemitism, as seen in the campaign against George Soros, for example. I also make a plea to the Minister to see that the UK Government do more to encourage other countries to promote the just and speedy restitution of property that was seized by the Nazis during the holocaust, much of which has still not been returned to the families of the original owners, despite promises to do so across Europe. I would be grateful if Her Majesty’s Government, through diplomatic channels, could convince other Governments to take action on that.

Let me say again what an honour it has been to be part of a debate where we treat each other with respect. Parliament is all the richer for that today. I am not normally a fan of this place, but Parliament can be very proud of how it has conducted itself today, and I think that sets a good example to our constituents.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I really wish beyond words that we did not have to have this debate today, but we do, because the holocaust happened—there are some who dispute that, but it did happen—and because of the heroic efforts of holocaust survivors, who, every time they give their testimony, are choosing to relive the horrors of their past to try to protect us from reliving those horrors in future. Despite all that, we are failing to see the same warning signs as those that were there in Germany in 1932 and 1933. We are failing to see them here today in these islands. They are sometimes on display in this Parliament, and all too often in parts of our society that no democratically credible politician should ever associate themselves with, but all too often we do because we think there might be some political advantage to ourselves from it.

The hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), in a deeply moving speech, referred briefly to the contribution that holocaust survivor Eva Clarke made to the event in Parliament earlier this week. One of his colleagues referred to a tiny spark of light in the darkness. Sparks of light in the darkness do not get much tinier than Eva, because she weighed just over three pounds when she was born. She is possibly the youngest of all holocaust survivors, because she was born after some of the
camps had been liberated. She was born on the cart that was taking her pregnant mum from the train to the death camp at Mauthausen on 29 April 1945. The reason that date was so significant was because if it had been 28 April, Eva and her mum would have been put into the gas chambers and killed, but on 28 April the gas chambers stopped their evil work because they had run out of gas. Twenty-four hours difference in the arrival time of a train meant literally all the difference in the world to Eva, and it means that we still have the benefit of Eva’s testimony—and her mum’s testimony, until she died a few years ago. Such testimony reminds us not only of the horrors of what happened but the immense power of good—of love—that was demonstrated all the way through. We have heard mention of some of the families who sheltered Jewish families, at enormous risk to themselves, for months and sometimes even years, taking complete strangers into their homes and hiding them in order to try to protect them from the evil that was about to be done to them.

As everyone else has done, I say thank you to Eva and to all the other survivors, who do not need to put themselves through this. They could just go away and live a quiet life, and try to come to terms privately with what they had experienced in their younger years. They choose to put themselves through it to try to give us the warning, again and again and again, of what happens when hatred becomes normalised—when it becomes normalised to spit at a child on their way to school just because he or she is Jewish, normalised to react to news of a killing by wondering which side of a divide the killers were on and which side the victim was on before we decide how we are going to react, or normalised for Christians to hound their fellow Christians out of their homes because they are the “wrong kind” of Christians. Within my lifetime, in parts of these islands, that has happened to Christians on both sides of the divide. When it becomes normalised for people to say that it is horrific that some of the families trying to cross the border from Mexico into America are carrying prayer mats—when the carrying of a prayer mat is a sign that somebody becomes a threat—we should all be concerned. That blatantly racist, Islamophobic attitude has not only become normalised—it got elected, because that was said in a tweet from the President of the United States of America.

A lot of this hatred comes not just from social media but from the front pages of newspapers that I do not need to name. I make a plea to all Members here and ask the Front Benchers on both sides of the House to relay this message back to their colleagues as well. When those same newspapers ask for an interview, when they offer 150 quid for an article, or when they invite us to celebration parties for their editors’ achievements, we need to think about how we respond, because if we support, in any way whatsoever, the purveyors of hatred—whether it is antisemitism, Islamophobia or any other form of hatred—our words, “Never again”, will only be words, and hollow words at that. The 6 million murdered Jews of Europe and the millions of other murdered citizens of Europe deserve much, much more than hollow words.

3.4 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) for introducing it and all the Members who have spoken.

I am proud to be a friend of Israel. I am proud to remember the Balfour declaration and the role that the British played, along with their allies, in returning some of Israel to her people after the second world war. In 1920, Britain assumed responsibility for Palestine under a League of Nations mandate. During the next two decades, more than 100,000 Jews entered their home country. I am proud of the part that this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—always better together—played in ensuring that the Jewish people could return to their homelands.

I declare an interest, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. The motivation for many of us to speak in this debate is our own faith and how we feel when we see wrongs that have to be righted and wrongs that have to be spoken about. This debate is one of those occasions.

We now have a part to play to secure the history of the Jewish people once again. In a world that seeks to whitewash and even begin to refute the evidence of a holocaust, it is more important than ever that we in this country take a stand about the true history of the Jews during the second world war.

I read an article by a writer who happened to be born into the Jewish faith regarding holocaust denial. He outlined how a friend’s 88-year-old Jewish grandfather travels the length and breadth of the country to talk in schools of his experience of the camps. Many Members have referred to similar people they have met. He ensures that the children he reaches have heard with their own ears the tales of the horror that happened when people refused to question evil and inhumanity. That gentleman is a hero, but he is one of the few survivors, and with them go the first-hand experiences.

Those stories need to be told. My fear is that when we lose the first-hand experiences, it becomes simply numbers on a page, and now it becomes a number that umpteen people on Facebook deny, without measures being taken by the administration. I was brought up to learn in history classes of Bloody Mary’s reign and her choice to kill by burning at the stake 300 Protestants. It is all very well to look at the historical context, but we must never lose compassion or thought for any of the families who lost loved ones in this horrific manner. The definition of compassion is feeling someone else’s pain in our heart. Every one of us here has felt others’ pain in our heart, and that is what we have tried to express.

Will the slaughter of 6 million human beings become a fact in a history lesson, or will it be a lesson that every generation learns regarding mankind’s ability to be completely and utterly full of evil and madness? We must not allow the massacre of Jews during the holocaust to become something in movies and history classes; it must be a living, breathing lesson embraced by every generation. We must ensure that the names of those who were murdered are spoken and that children are afforded the opportunity to visit Auschwitz, to see the wedding bands and shoes that reach beyond the grave.

We must ensure that schools retain in-depth teaching of this terrible period of history and do not simply pay lip service to it.

We must ensure that we live in a United Kingdom where our British Jewish citizens feel able and happy to recount the stories handed down through generations. We must ensure that the representatives in this Parliament play their part and stamp out the antisemitism and
misinformation that is not dissimilar to the propaganda that Goebbels was so proud of. We have a role to play in protecting not simply the history of the holocaust but its legacy: the promise from a horrified world that we will never let this take place again.

In my final minute, I want to mention the part that Strangford played, long before it was the constituency it is today. The Kindertransport children were transported from Germany to England and then on to other parts of the United Kingdom. Some of those children came to McGill’s farm in Millisle in my constituency. The farm and some of the buildings that the children were housed in are still there. Some of those people stayed and married, and there are generations of them there.

I will finish with a line I read in an article, which said: “One thing we all share: none of us can trace our families back more than a couple of generations. The Holocaust, as I’ve come to think of it, is history’s loudest full-stop.” It should not be allowed to be a full stop. It must be an ellipsis that indicates an unfinished thought. We cannot draw a line under the holocaust as something that was done and is over. We must ensure that we continue to think about and consider the holocaust—the history and, most importantly, the humanity of it all—and we must ensure that the generations that follow do the same. That is what this debate is all about.

3.9 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a real privilege to sum up for the Scottish National party in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on securing the debate, and the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) on tabling an early-day motion for us all to sign to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day.

This is the 18th Holocaust Memorial Day, commemorating the 74th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and this debate has become an annual event in the House. In the book of remembrance that Members sign each year, we often see it written that we should “Never forget”. Perhaps more than that, we should always actively remember. This debate provides the opportunity to renew that and to reflect on the holocaust, especially as the number of survivors continues to dwindle, as we have heard many times today.

This year also marks significant anniversaries of other 20th-century genocides: 40 years since the end of the genocide in Cambodia, and the 25th anniversary of the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda. If the number of survivors of the holocaust continues to dwindle, there are still many survivors of those genocides. The late 20th century is still with us, and the memory is still visible and raw. I took part in the same delegation that was led by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), and it had an equally powerful impact on me. An estimated 1 million Tutsis were killed in just 100 days between 7 April and mid-July 1994 in Rwanda. The memorial garden in Kigali, which we visited, is incredibly moving. Over 250,000 victims are interred on that site.

I remember at the time in 1994 and indeed since, hearing of the Rwandan genocide almost as though it was a relatively spontaneous event, with the Hutus incited by their Government to rise up and take matters into their own hands. What that memorial and the visit more generally made me realise is, in fact, how premeditated the killings were, how the roadblocks that sprung up had been co-ordinated, how weapons had been manufactured for months if not years, and how a decades-long propaganda campaign had demonised the Tutsi community. When the hon. Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), and others, said that the holocaust did not begin with killing, but with words, it strikes me that that is true of all the other genocides in the 20th century and throughout history, not least in Rwanda.

As the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton said, there are positive lessons from the aftermath in Rwanda, and if the theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is Torn from Home, one of the key memories for me was the reconciliation village, where perpetrators and victims together now make their homes. They have sought and exercised forgiveness, and they teach their children to learn from the mistake of their forebears. Such a first-hand opportunity to experience and witness the legacy of genocide is invaluable. It is one that we must find ways of extending to as many of the current and future generations as possible, including by hearing the kind of survivor stories that my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) spoke about, as have others throughout the debate.

I equally join in the tributes paid to the Holocaust Educational Trust and its “Lessons from Auschwitz” programme. Many Members have already taken part in that, and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) spoke about one of his predecessors. The First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, visited in 2018, following the Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, who accompanied 200 schoolchildren on their visit in 2017. The Scottish Government have committed to continuing to fund the “Lessons from Auschwitz” programme. I think the First Minister has said that, as long as she is in office, she will make sure that continues.

The national lottery has recently announced £296,000 for Scotland’s first Jewish Heritage Centre, which will be based in the Garnethill synagogue, the oldest in Scotland—founded in 1879—which I have had the privilege of visiting. That will include a Scottish holocaust era study centre to provide public access to the important records held by the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, which document the experience of adult and child refugees who fled Nazi Europe before the outbreak of the second world war and of those who came after as survivors of the concentration camps.

I agree with all the sentiments expressed today about how we must continue to provide an environment where antisemitism is condemned and called out, and where it is unacceptable in any circumstances.

An undeniable rise in incidents has been documented by the Community Security Trust, and we have a particular responsibility as parliamentarians to lead by example and promote zero tolerance, even within our own parties, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) pointed out. Likewise, we should support positive initiatives that celebrate faith and diversity, and promote tolerance.

I was pleased to attend an event at the end of Scottish Interfaith Week in November, and it concluded with a moving exhibition at the University of Glasgow of the work of the Glasgow Jewish artist, Hannah Frank, who died in 2008 aged 100. The theme of this year’s Holocaust
Memorial Day is Torn from Home, and events such as the Holocaust and other genocides tear us all from our comfort zone and our shared humanity. We must find ways of recovering that.

Holocaust Memorial Day takes place on 27 January, and on 25 January the memory is celebrated around the world of Scotland’s great humanitarian poet, Robert Burns. He reflected on needless violence and murder in his 1790 poem, “I murder hate”:

“"I murder hate by flood or field,
Tho' glory's name may screen us;
In wars at home I'll spend my blood—
Life-giving wars of Venus.
The deities that I adore
Are social Peace and Plenty;
I'm better pleas'd to make one more,
Than be the death of twenty."

Global deaths due to genocide in the 20th century are far in excess of 20 million, so as we remember those torn from home by genocide, perhaps we can also reflect on those humanitarian values expressed by Burns, and on how much needless suffering could have been, and still can be avoided, if the deities we choose to adore are social peace and plenty.

3.16 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) for his passionate and eloquent speech, and for the work he does throughout the year to ensure that the horrors are never forgotten and that lessons are learned. I add my tributes to those for Lord Alf Dubs. He learned that lesson a particularly hard way, and he is assiduous in applying what he went through and how he felt to the refugees of today.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), the chair of the all-party group against antisemitism said, we must show solidarity in the face of antisemitism, because unfortunately that scourge is still very much part of the modern world. Social media has given it a new platform on which people can speak vile hatred and feel validated in their views by others. I am horrified that many British Jewish people to whom I have spoken are considering moving either to Israel or to another country. It is appalling that in this country, and this century, people are considering being “torn from home”—the theme of today’s debate—but it is not altogether surprising. There has been an increase in attacks, and in my area of Greater Manchester there have been three attacks on the Urmston Jewish Cemetery. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) eloquently put it, home is community, family and friends, and we must support those in our community who feel threatened today.

We must tackle antisemitism wherever it is seen, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) said, there should be no bystanders. She has shown that many times through her actions as well as her speeches. We must condemn antisemitism and root it out wherever it is seen, including in our own backyards, and that includes the Labour party.

The Labour party was formed to give a voice to the voiceless and to represent the oppressed. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) that it is the responsibility of us all to show that we have zero tolerance of antisemitism in the Labour party, or wherever it rears its ugly head. It is not only vile, but it refuses to recognise, indeed denigrates, the great contribution of the Jewish people to this country—indeed, any country in which they have settled.

I am proud that in Greater Manchester we have the largest community of Jewish people in Britain after Greater London; and they have been there for over 200 years. It has been home to individuals as diverse as Nathan Mayer Rothschild and Karl Marx. They were very different characters, but each saw Manchester as their home. They chose to come to Manchester. However, the theme today is Torn from Home, and that is people who have no choice. They had no choice, as children, to be sent to an area they did not know, to people they did not know. There was no choice for people torn from their home and sent to the death camps, torn from their families, their friends, herded into cattle trucks and often to their death. They were human beings like us, 6 million of whom were exterminated, and that is a staggering number. In fact, it is a number so big that it can hardly be comprehended, as my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said.

We are also here to hear the testimonies and listen to people’s stories, and hear about the contributions of the survivors, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) and for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) reminded us. That is why the Holocaust Educational Trust does such great work in schools and colleges, taking in the recorded testimony of survivors, and taking students, such as those from Winstanley College in my constituency, to visit the death camps. There is no better way to try and comprehend that horror, as I know from my personal experience. I took my daughter when she was 11—20 years ago—to visit one of the camps, and she has never forgotten it, and neither have I.

Remembering the holocaust gives us a perspective on the world we live in today, and that is all the more important as we reflect on the genocides that have continued to occur in recent years, such as that in Rwanda, which my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) spoke about. She gave us a story of hope—hope that people can come together. However, we also need to be aware of the bigotry, the prejudice, the hatred, and the anti-democratic forces that are still here today. The Holocaust may be a part of the past, but the causes continue to cast a dark shadow over the present, and we must remain vigilant and speak out, and be louder.

3.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I thank the Backbench Business Committee, and commend the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) for securing this vital debate.
It has been a real pleasure to hear nearly 30 powerful speeches and contributions by hon. Members across the House. It was a particular honour to hear the personal stories of the hon. Members for Dudley North and for Bassetlaw (John Mann). I echo the pledge to fight racism and prejudice wherever it is found. To put the mind of the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) at rest, Lord Pickles is focused on the matter of restitution.

The holocaust remains an incalculable tragedy that has touched so many lives, including hundreds of refugees, kinder and holocaust survivors who now call Britain home. Every year we are privileged to hear their testimony. Some tell of their life before the Nazi occupation and the impact of Kristallnacht. Others give harrowing accounts of conditions in the death camps and the forced marches. Others were separated from their parents as children, to be brought up safely.

There are also stories of those who reached out and saved others. We can take pride in the fact that some of those extraordinary people were British. One such man worked for the Foreign Office. As we have heard, his name was Captain Frank Foley. Just yesterday, at a moving ceremony in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, a bust of Captain Foley was unveiled by the Foreign Secretary, and holocaust survivor Mala Tribich.

As we have heard, the theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is Torn from Home. It is especially poignant for me, as Minister responsible for housing and homelessness. Home usually means a place of safety, comfort and security. As I think about the holocaust and the subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda and Srebrenica, I am mindful of the thousands upon thousands of people who never saw their homes again. It is also important to note that this year is the 40th anniversary of the genocide in Cambodia and the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda—in 2013 I had the honour to visit the memorial in Kigali.

Few events have had such a monumental impact on our democracy, our history and our values as the holocaust. That is why this Government are so proud to support the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and its vital work in communities across the country. I pay tribute to Laura Marks and the team led by Olivia Marks-Woldman who have ensured that Holocaust Memorial Day goes from strength to strength. Their incredible efforts will see more than 10,000 events take place up and down the country this year.

I acknowledge a number of others as well: Karen Pollock and the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust, educating young people of every background about the holocaust and the important lessons it teaches us today; Dr Ben Barkow, his work at the Wiener Library and in setting up the Holocaust Explained website to help us all better understand that dark period of history; Lillian Black, who has worked tirelessly to create the Holocaust centre at Huddersfield University, which will provide vital holocaust education for young people; and, finally, the amazing work at the holocaust memorial centre in Newark, which is ensuring that survivor testimony is preserved for future generations.

I will also reflect on the historic task given to my Department to build a national holocaust memorial and learning centre, which we are doing with a cross-party foundation headed by the right hon. Lord Pickles and the right hon. Ed Balls. There can be no more powerful symbol of our commitment to remember the men, women and children who were murdered in the holocaust, and all the other victims of Nazi persecution, including Roma, gay and disabled people, masons and others. It will draw on the history of the holocaust and subsequent genocides. It will stand as a memorial, yes, but equally it will stand as a warning—a warning of where hatred can lead and a warning that when we say, “Never again”, we have to mean it.

After the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau—which I was privileged to visit privately in 2017—the world said, “Never again.” Yet exactly 30 years later, in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge claimed the lives of a quarter of the population through mass murder and starvation, and we said, “Never again.” Twenty years later, almost 1 million Rwandans were murdered in 100 days, in a conflict in which friend turned against friend, and neighbour against neighbour. Once more, we said, “Never again.”

We then witnessed the murder of 8,372 mostly Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica—I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his amazing speech—and we said, “Never again.”

Rather than despair at the world’s collective failures, however, we must reaffirm our ongoing responsibility as citizens, as a nation, to do everything we can to stop such atrocities happening again. We must remember, too, that tolerance and reconciliation begin at home. The rise in the number of antisemitic incidents in the UK is shameful. It saddens me that Jewish communities in the UK should ever feel a sense of threat.

Each year that passes, I am mindful that living witnesses to the tragedy of the holocaust are becoming fewer in number, so I will conclude by remembering two incredible women we lost last year: Gena Turgel, who survived the Krakow ghetto, a death march, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, as we have heard; and Sabina Miller, who was born in Warsaw, survived the Warsaw ghetto and spent most of the second world war on the run from the Nazis. In later life, Sabina worked closely with the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, receiving the British Empire Medal in 2017 for services to education. Both lives are a warning of the dangers of hatred but, equally, they are profound examples of tolerance, kindness and respect. They are examples we should do our best to follow—and never forget.

Again, I thank everyone for this debate. It is the right thing to do. It has been an honour for me to be the Minister replying today.

3.28 pm

Ian Austin: This has been an amazing debate. We have heard moving and powerful speeches, and had some amazing contributions. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to have the debate, and every Member who supported the application for it and who took part in it. It has given us the opportunity to pay our respects to the victims of history’s greatest crime and to dedicate ourselves to opposing racism and prejudice wherever we find it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day 2019.
Appropriate ME Treatment

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Carol Monaghan to move the motion. She has up to 15 minutes.

Given that so many Members wish to speak, I shall be very grateful if they do all that they can to help each other.

3.29 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): This debate is long overdue and much anticipated, and I thank the Members who have remained in the House on a Thursday afternoon to contribute to it.

There have been previous debates on ME, including one called by the then Member of Parliament for Great Yarmouth, Anthony Wright. That debate took place 20 years ago, and in 20 years little has changed for those living with ME. There is currently no cure, and many with the condition experience inadequate care and support. An estimated quarter of a million people in the UK suffer from it, and we are letting those people down. Many adults with ME cannot maintain employment or relationships, while children frequently fall behind at school. The ignorance surrounding the condition makes it harder for people to access benefits, and assessors from the Department for Work and Pensions often decide that sufferers are fit for work.

ME has specific characteristics—severe fatigue, debilitating muscle and joint pain, and extreme sensitivity to light and sound—but an important marker for the condition is that mental and physical activities can make the symptoms more acute. Some people with severe ME spend their days in darkened rooms, unable even to watch TV or listen to music. Touch is intolerable. Many are tube fed. For these individuals, ME is a life sentence, but it is a life spent existing, not living.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: Very briefly.

Mr Cunningham: I fully support the motion, because it alludes to some of the complaints that ME sufferers have brought to my surgeries. This is a timely debate, and what the hon. Lady has said so far is quite right.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman.

This condition is largely unknown, because those affected are often hidden away. I commend the ME community for lobbying so successfully to ensure so many Members are here this afternoon. Ultimately, what that community wants is better treatment and care for people with ME.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way, on that point?

Carol Monaghan: Again, very briefly.

Paula Sherriff: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her sterling work on this issue. It is my privilege to represent Lucy, a lovely teenage girl in my constituency who has ME. Her parents have requested me to ask the House to ensure that biomedical research shapes all aspects of support—in which case it must be funded—and to reiterate that ME is a physiological condition, although it is often treated as a psychological condition. Lucy was asked if she needed to get around. She was told to just get up and walk, but she needs a wheelchair. Much more awareness is needed generally.

Carol Monaghan: Yes, ME receives far less research funding than other similarly prevalent conditions. That, I fear, reflects the attitude of some in the medical community who consider it to be behavioural rather than a pathological condition.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: I shall have to keep going. I apologise, but a great many Members want to speak.

The psychological view of ME led to the controversial and now debunked PACE trial—PACE is “Pacing, graded Activity, and Cognitive behaviour therapy; a randomised Evaluation”. The researchers reported that with cognitive behavioural therapy and graded exercise therapy—in which patients were encouraged to attempt increasing levels of exercise—approximately 60% of patients “improved” and 22% “recovered”. The treatments were labelled safe. Patient groups, however, were saying the opposite. Many who were able to walk when they embarked on a course of graded exercise dropped out of the treatment in wheelchairs or bedbound. Furthermore, patients were pressurised to describe improvements that they did not feel. As the trial progressed and the results did not meet the authors’ expectations, they simply lowered the threshold to define improvement. In some cases, those whose condition had deteriorated were classed as “recovered”. That is simply not good science.

The recommendation of graded exercise has caused untold physical damage to thousands of people. In fact, a 2018 survey found that 89% of ME sufferers experienced worsened symptoms after increasing activity. If graded exercise were a drug, it would have lost its licence.

The blatant ongoing refusal to accept ME as a physiological doubtless explains the lack of proper research. Of course it is the Medical Research Council that allocates funds, but the Government can demonstrate their true commitment to improving the lives of ME sufferers. The Scottish Government have committed £90,000 for a PhD scholarship to support research into the causes, diagnosis and treatment of ME, and I would ask that the UK Government follow this lead.

During the debate in June, the Minister for public health, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is in his place, said that £2.62 million had been spent on ME research since 2011. Let me be very clear: this money was spent on behavioural studies. We need money to be spent on biomedical research, and we are looking for a solid commitment from the Minister.

Until we have developed effective treatments, however, we must ensure suitable care plans are in place to respond to patients’ varying needs. Many US agencies are now removing their recommendations for graded exercise. However the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines continue to advocate this, despite patient surveys consistently indicating its harm. The risks are not acknowledged in the guidelines, undermining patients’ ability to give informed consent,
and some patients are being threatened with being sectioned if they do not commit to a programme of graded exercise.

Mr Goodwill: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: Very briefly.

Mr Goodwill: Many consider the NICE guidelines to be completely inappropriate. Does the hon. Lady agree that the timescale for that review, which will end in 2020, is far too long for these patients?

Carol Monaghan: Actually, NICE has taken a very positive step in reviewing the guidelines—it is listening to the community—but until they are published in 2020, we need NICE to make a public statement about the potential harm of graded exercise; patients must be made aware of the risk. It is a big ask to request that the Minister talks to NICE and encourages it to make that statement, so that this information can be added to the current guidelines while we are waiting for updated guidelines in 2020.

Care programmes for people vary greatly. Some with ME describe medical professionals who are sympathetic, but others talk of being disbelieved and forced down treatment paths to which they have not consented. Coverage of ME in many medical textbooks remains potentially misleading and inadequate, even non-existent. Health professionals must be equipped with clear guidance on diagnosing ME early and accurately, and with appropriate basic management advice.

At the end of last June’s debate, the Minister for public health resolved that “as a result of the debate I will redouble my efforts to” raise awareness among medical professionals concerning ME, and said that “as part of my role as Minister for primary care, all GPs certainly should be aware of ME”.—[Official Report, 21 June 2018; Vol. 643, c. 229WH.]

That was a welcome statement; I would now like to understand what concrete steps have been taken since then and how we can get this information added to the guidelines.

Some of the worst cases we hear about are children with ME. ME affects an estimated 25,000 children in the UK. Many experience significant distress when disbelieved by medical and teaching staff, often when these professionals do not understand how ME affects the child’s ability to attend school.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Is the hon. Member aware that one in five families looking after children with ME have been referred to child protection services?

Carol Monaghan: Yes. The statistics are terrible, but I want to describe one such case, which is really quite harrowing. It involves a girl, B, whose name cannot be disclosed. B became ill at the age of eight. A diagnosis of probable ME was made, but it was suggested that the underlying issues were psychological. To show willing, her parents took her to a child psychiatrist, who then involved social services. B’s parents were warned that if they did not fully comply, child protection proceedings would be initiated. Social services specified graded exercise, despite being warned of the dangers. As a result, B deteriorated rapidly until she became wheelchair-bound. Under threat of court action, B’s parents were then forced to take her to a children’s hospital, having been warned that they were “not under arrest just yet.”

B’s parents found what they presumed to be a safer option in an ME unit run by a consultant who appeared to view ME as an organic illness, but this was disastrous. B arrived wheelchair-bound but still able to sit upright and read and write, but under the activity programme, she deteriorated. Her mother was banned from visiting, but other parents in the unit observed B unattended in the wheelchair, in constant pain, unable to sit upright, with her head hanging down the side and crying in distress. This treatment continued for five months. Her parents were threatened that if B did not progress, she would be transferred to a psychiatric unit or placed in foster care. Desperate, they turned to Dr Nigel Speight and the Young ME Sufferers Trust. B was finally allowed home, and her name was eventually removed from the at-risk register. However, by the age of 15, she was declared paralysed, unable to feed or wash herself and utterly dependent on carers. Doctors, psychiatrists and social services all failed her when she was eight. As the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) suggested, this is the case for one in five families living with a child with ME.

A firm diagnosis of ME protects the child from these proceedings, but unfortunately, paediatricians are often reluctant to give this, simply because they do not understand the condition. This leaves the child open to social service intervention. Often, paediatricians phone a so-called expert on ME, who immediately prescribes graded exercise, without even seeing the child in person. I say to the Minister that this is a national disgrace and it needs urgent action. Children who are already blighted by ME must not be subjected to this trauma. I ask him to consider this issue with the utmost seriousness, and to give the House an assurance that parents will not be prosecuted simply for caring for a sick child.

ME has been disregarded for far too long, and it can be fatal. In the UK, there have been two patients, Sophia Mirza and Merryn Crofts, whose deaths have been attributed by coroners to ME. However, the actual number of deaths due to ME may be much higher, and we cannot wait for more. The ME community have waited decades for their voices to be not only heard but believed. The Government have the power to make radical changes, and I invite the Minister to meet groups of patients who would welcome the opportunity to describe their experience. Little progress has been made in the 20 years since the 1999 debate. Surely, Minister, in the 21st century we can do better for those suffering from this devastating illness.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If each hon. Member can stick to four minutes, we will get everyone in, and everyone will get equal time.

3.42 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), along with the hon. Member for Ceredigion
Sir David Amess: I hope that the good practice in the schools in my right hon. Friend’s constituency will be shared throughout the country.

Sufferers are too often left in agony for years, undiagnosed and untreated. GPs are failing to recognise or even believe the severity of symptoms that can devastate patients’ lives. I urge the Government, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North West did, to work with the medical profession to ensure that all GPs have the understanding to diagnose, treat and manage ME with compassion.

However, a lack of awareness among GPs is a symptom of how little we understand the condition medically. There is no known cause, reason or cure, and there is a worrying lack of investment in biomedical research for ME in this country. Without that research, we simply will not be able to improve diagnosis or treatment for patients. I join Members across this House in calling on the Minister to consider properly funding the biomedical research that ME desperately needs.

Finally, as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines are under review—I was on the Health Committee for 10 years and remember the arguments—we should now take this opportunity to start listening to patients. The controversy of the PACE trial arose from a failure to listen to sufferers and to believe their experiences. For the NICE guidelines to be successful and transform sufferers’ lives, we need to listen to patients. I sincerely hope that this debate will not just be mere words and that it will lead to some well overdue action. In signing off her letter, my constituent Isabel said:

“After 20 years of pain, thank you for listening.”

Now that this House has listened, I hope that we can have some action.

3.48 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I think and congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on her commendable perseverance in pursuing this matter. Like others, I have been approached by constituents to discuss ME, which caused me to dredge my memory and recall individuals whom I have known personally who have suffered from this illness. From my conversations with sufferers, I know that they have been confronted with a range of problems that still exist for others today. Those problems include: a lack of understanding and support in the workplace and in schools, which can mean a loss of job opportunities or problems for the parents of young pupils; inadequate understanding by clinicians; delays in diagnosis and, indeed, inappropriate treatments and tests; incomprehension and insensitivity by the DWP for recipients of benefits, which can lead to a loss of benefits. [Interruption.] Sorry, I mean the DWP. A Freudian slip. I do not blame the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for that particular problem.

The loss of those benefits can lead to a loss of income, leading to life challenges over and above the problems such people confront because of their illness. Over and above all that, there is the stigma of mental or psychological problems, which can reinforce the sense of social isolation. It is amazing that, despite the debates we have had on this subject and despite our world-class NHS and top-class medical research, these problems have not been addressed.
Like many people, I have personal examples from those who have had their life devastated by this illness. Lucy, a vivacious young political activist I know, was heading for an early parliamentary career before she was struck down. She found that she could manage to work only 10 hours a week, and describes how every speech and every meeting is absolutely devastating to her body. She describes it as remaining awake while her body sleeps. She went to the doctor, and even different doctors within the same medical practice gave different diagnoses, which demonstrates the unbelievable lack of comprehension of this illness.

I would have liked to give many more examples, but I finish by saying that, in summing up last June’s Westminster Hall debate, the Minister spoke about channelling research, but the problem is that it seems to be going towards psychological research, rather than neurological research. He also said that the NICE draft consultation will be ready in 2020. Why the wait, given our knowledge of the scale of these problems? He said that he would follow up with the DWP on the problems there, and I hope he can report on that.

3.52 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): It was a pleasure to apply for this debate with the hon. Members for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) and others. How could I possibly forget the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)?

Like other Members, I will speak about my own constituents’ experiences. As we have already heard, so many Members are here on a Thursday afternoon to talk on behalf of their constituents. We held out for a debate on the Floor of the House, and we are debating not a “take note” motion but a substantive motion. This House debates many contentious issues, passions can run high and there can be many points of order, but hopefully we will see the House of Commons at its finest this afternoon as we do our job of bringing to the attention both of Ministers and of the wider public an issue of real importance that devastates the lives of our constituents and their families.

We have already heard about the issues of funding for biomedical research, and it is clear that, given the prevalence of the condition, there must now be an increase in funding not only to help advance our understanding of its underlying biology but to develop new diagnostic tests and better, more targeted treatments. The problems and dangers of graded exercise therapy and CBT have already been powerfully set out. My constituents have also called for NICE to take their concerns into account and to remove those treatments from its guidelines. We have heard the call for NICE to issue an immediate public statement on the harm that may be caused by the current guidelines for the period they remain active.

It is right that we want GPs and health professionals to know more.

Paula Sherriff: My constituent has to travel 40-odd miles to Manchester for treatment. With a condition such as ME, that is particularly distressing. Does the right hon. Lady agree that we need many more specialists throughout the country?

Nicky Morgan: I agree with the hon. Lady. We all know that resources may be constrained, but we want constituents to be able to see specialists who really know about a condition. One of the most powerful things that we have heard is that not only are sufferers fighting a condition that makes them feel terrible, but they are not believed when they say what they are going through. That must compound the difficulties of the condition. Having a GP who not only believes them, but wants to help and understand, would make a huge difference. The same is true of other health professionals.

We have talked about children being affected. One of my constituents wrote to me to say that she had had ME since 2013, and had been left housebound. She added:

“As if having this illness wasn’t devastating enough, in 2016, my then 10 year old son became unwell and never got better, he has also been diagnosed with ME.”

We have heard today about the potential involvement of child protection services. In addition, some schools can deal with the condition, but some schools will struggle. I was contacted only this week, as the debate was being advertised, by another constituent. She talked about her daughter, Elisha, who is now 11 years old and has had ME for four years. Elisha has been discharged from the community paediatrician, physiotherapist and occupational therapist and left with no support or medical help, because there is no funding for paediatric ME care in Leicestershire. She has missed most of her schooling in the last four years. Clearly, with children as well as with adults, people must be believed and the condition must be investigated. It is a considerable source of stress for parents and carers, but of course it has a negative effect on the child’s personal development and future life chances.

I have family experience of ME, but I want to pay tribute to the constituent who first brought the matter to my attention, Sarah Reed. Some Members, particularly Opposition Members, will know her as the wife of the former Labour MP, Andy Reed, who was my predecessor in Loughborough. Sarah has been a tireless campaigner for ME Action and for sufferers.

There are 250,000—a quarter of a million—sufferers of ME, or chronic fatigue syndrome, in the UK. With any other condition, we would not allow a situation in which people continue to struggle to have their voice heard, and the NICE guidance takes so long to be delivered. There are many examples, and it is time for the Government to respond.

3.57 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I thank all the hon. Members who secured this debate. In preparing to speak, I have become more and more angry about the injustice and pain heaped on those who suffer from ME. They live in a country where their illness is at best belittled and at worst ignored. Their illness is sneered at thanks to the development, in the medical field and in the press, of a culture of believing that it is just people being lazy or women being hysterical.

The effects of the condition can be totally debilitating. Any other illness with such life-limiting effects would not have psychological and behavioural treatments as the go-to options. This is not a psychosomatic or psychosocial issue, and a better response is needed.
Graded exercise therapy must be suspended and CBT therapy should be an option, add-on or complement to other treatments, not the treatment.

There is a growing consensus about the use of pacing for managing ME. Sadly, current NICE guidelines state that there is insufficient research evidence about the benefits or harm of pacing. That is why more funding for research is vital. We need a commitment from the Minister to increase the sparse funding for ME research, which at present stands at a paltry £1 for every sufferer.

The now widely discredited PACE trial had far-reaching implications. Not only did it add to the existing myths around ME, but it led to alterations in the application of benefits and eligibility for social care.

For someone who knows how unwell they are, there must be nothing worse than being told that it is all in their head and being sneered at by the very professions and organisations that should be supporting them. The constant quest to be believed and the desperation of just wanting some answers was summed up powerfully by my constituent, Barbara Kell. She described the endless rolling of eyes by some GPs and the frustration of others who wanted to help her but knew they would be hauled up in front of the General Medical Council if they did. Barbara told me that she is living “half a life”, and that she grieves for her past. She said she is missing out on so much, including time with her grandchildren—I can testify to the House that they are gorgeous little girls. Like thousands of others, Barbara wants and deserves to live in a country where the Government properly fund research; where treatment helps and does not hinder; where support from the state does not come at the cost of dignity; and where people actually listen to her. Right now, that is not the case.

Barbara told me that every time she went for blood tests, which were of course the wrong ones, and the results came back, she was actually hoping it was something other treatments, not the treatment.

As several Members have already said, this condition continues to advise the ME Association and has come to speak. We have very little time, and I am sure the Minister to increase the sparse funding for ME research, which at present stands at a paltry £1 for every sufferer.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am terribly sorry but it is obvious that a lot of people wish to speak. We have very little time, and I am sure the House wishes the Minister to have time to answer the many important points raised, so I must reduce the time limit to three minutes.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I shall be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and the other Members who applied on securing this debate and enabling us to raise our concerns on a cross-party basis. As has been touched on, 250,000 people live with this condition in the UK. It needs research, support and a change of culture, so that sufferers feel supported and believed and can have some hope of living the sort of normal life that we all expect and deserve.
dreadful condition. The PACE trial and the need for a rewrite of the NICE guidelines have been touched on already. It is important that NICE bring that forward. It would be interesting to know why the Government have cut the money for biomedical research and the National Institutes of Health. If that money could be put back in, that would be one bit of good news the Minister could give us. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) touched on the role of the Department for Work and Pensions. It is important that this condition be recognised and that sufferers get early support. On the work of clinical commissioning groups, the NHS has to do more and spend its own local resources.

To finish, I want to touch on the overlap with B12 deficiency, which has not been mentioned yet. Autoimmune metaplastic atrophic gastritis, previously known as pernicious anaemia, is often confused with ME. It is very important that we encourage local health bodies to rewrite the rules for that condition as well to ensure that people are correctly diagnosed. It is very unhelpful when people’s conditions are not properly recognised as it can result in a downward spiral of psychological problems. It is about time we spent the necessary resources on this condition and gave the necessary help to sufferers.

4.8 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I could easily say amen and sit down, but I would like to compliment the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on her speech.

I hope this debate and the passionate interest of colleagues from the across the House bring some encouragement to those suffering from this condition that they are not forgotten. Louise McAllan from Riverside got in touch with me last June. She tells me that ME led her to medically retire in her early 30s, that she has been too sick to leave her bed for months at a time, that she is unable to tolerate light or sound, that she cannot meet her friends and that she suffers intolerable pain. She was told by a neurologist in a major hospital that there was no such thing as ME, and she was told when she got a diagnosis that at least she did not have anything serious.

Catherine Schmitz from Stirling got in touch last May to tell me her story. For her, it is a dreadful illness that has left her signed off work for 22 years. She has balance and vision problems and sensitivity to light and noise. To get a diagnosis, she was passed around hospital departments that could look only at their own specialist areas.

Cathy Dickson from Torbrex got in touch in November 2017. Her case and the dangerous advice that she was given saw her become more ill because of doctors who had no knowledge of ME. She continues to fight for the support that she needs and deserves.

Pam Sullivan from Bridge of Allan also suffers from ME, which has left her with crippling fatigue, exhaustion, viral symptoms, muscle pain, and impaired cognitive function. Without her loving family, she would have no support at all.

I know the Minister is both compassionate and dedicated, so I hope that he will respond to the demands that we are hearing today in this debate. Treatments that harm patients should be discontinued with immediate effect. Does he appreciate the fact that ME patients cannot wait for NICE guidelines to be reviewed? I very much hope that he will agree that it is simply not acceptable that seriously ill people should be left feeling that, somehow, they are to blame for not getting better, and that if only they had a better attitude and a different mindset, they would recover.

What more will be done to provide updated professional training for GPs and other healthcare professionals to properly recognise the symptoms of ME? What more can the Department for Work and Pensions do to see that ME patients are treated fairly and that the process to which they are subject does not worsen their illness—especially in respect of how assessments are conducted? Will the Minister please reassure the House that substantially more resources will be dedicated to biomedical research so that we can understand ME and begin to reach for solutions? Minister, people need help.

4.11 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): First, may I add my support to the motion as set out on the Order Paper and congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on leading the way in securing this debate and also on her excellent speech.

I spoke in a previous Westminster Hall debate and later put down written questions on ME on the basis suggested by Dr Ian Gibson, whom longer-standing Members may remember as the Labour Member for Norwich and a distinguished medical scientist in his own right. Ian was incensed by the use of graded exercise therapy. He said that it was less than useless and actually damaging to sufferers as well as causing them pain and raising false optimism that such therapies would work. Given that ME causes extreme fatigue, suggesting more exercise seems to me about as sensible as asking frostbite sufferers to walk about in snow. The other suggested treatment, cognitive behavioural therapy, helped to underpin the myth that ME is a psychological problem, not a physical condition. Neither of those supposed therapies should have been given credence and efforts should have been focused long ago on discovering the real causes of ME and on undertaking proper and thorough research to develop effective treatments.

I first became aware of ME more than 25 years ago when two of my young relatives were found to be suffering from the condition. The fact that I was not aware of ME until then is itself extraordinary given that some 25,000 children are estimated to be suffering from the condition. That is more than 38 children, on average, for every one of our constituencies.

I later became informed of sufferers in my own constituency and recall one man in particular who suffered constant pain and had to lie in a darkened room because he could not bear the light. Such symptoms are well known, but, of course, like so many illnesses, the severity of symptoms can vary greatly. MS, for example, can advance rapidly, or can remain fairly mild and stable for many years. Such variations do not invalidate the condition.

I have mentioned children with ME, but if all adults were included, the figure reaches 250,000, or nearly 400 per constituency; it really is that serious. The impact on the lives of those constituents is enormous, but the cost to society and to the economy is over £3.3 billion a year—an enormous sum. Therefore, finding causes and
discovering effective treatments are vital. Funding research must be a priority, first, to reduce the level of suffering, but also to reduce the wider social and economic costs. Research into ME represents just 0.02% of all grants given to funding agencies—just one 500th of the total, a pathetic amount.

In conclusion, I hope that we are now putting behind us all the myths and misdiagnoses related to ME. It is a physical condition and it is causing untold suffering. Recent research has looked very promising, and has pointed to possible causes of ME. One factor in particular has recently received publicity—the overactive immune system in many sufferers. It seems that we are starting to move in the right direction. We must congratulate the scientific and medical researchers who have done, and who are doing, so much valuable work towards finding solutions to the scourge of ME and alleviating the suffering that it causes.

I hope that Ministers and other hon. Members will take note of the reports in “Breakthrough”, the journal of ME research—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I call Mr Stephen Pound

4.14 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I say that north-west London salutes north-west Glasgow? I was honoured and proud—not that I had much choice in the matter—to support the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) when she applied for the debate. Her influence clearly spreads much further than Whiteinch, because only last week the Scottish Government launched their national action plan on neurological conditions. Action for ME was not particularly delighted with the plan, but one of the good things to come out of it is the allocation of £90,000 to fund a PhD study on the impact of ME. If that funding was increased proportionately for the whole country, it would be well over £1 million. That is something we certainly look forward to.

We have talked about the individual circumstances of many of our constituents. I want to mention one area that has not yet been mentioned: the provision and allocation of social housing. People with myalgic encephalomyelitis and chronic fatigue syndrome often have very specific housing needs. I think of my constituent Pamela Badhan—she is admirably represented by Councillor Deirdre Costigan—who finds it intensely pathetic amount.

I want to say to all those people out there who are suffering from ME; all those people suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome; all those people who have been ignored, belittled and, in many cases, insulted: “This House recognises the reality of your condition. This House will not sit idly by while you suffer. This House will not ignore you. This House will devote its intelligence and resources to research and ultimately resolve and cure this terrible condition, because we respect you, we understand you and we give credit and credibility to what so many people have for far too long denied.” ME sufferers the world over must know that this House and this nation are finally speaking for them.

4.17 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): How do I follow that? I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on securing this important debate. Last year I was invited by a group of ME patients in Lincoln to a screening of “Unrest”, Jennifer Brea’s deeply moving and personal documentary. The film really opened my eyes to the bravery and resilience that people living with ME display on a daily basis. Over the past week, many constituents have contacted my office to encourage me to attend this debate. Hearing at first hand from people in Lincoln about the complex difficulties that people with ME encounter really underlined for me the need to provide more support at national and local level.

ME is a disease that poses unique difficulties for those who suffer from it. We are all aware of its fluctuating and sometimes invisible symptoms, which have fuelled an unjust and debilitating stigma around the disease. That stigma is institutionalised in the fabric of ME medical research, healthcare provision and our welfare system. When it comes to treatment, most people do not have access to adequate care and support, and there is an almost total lack of appropriate secondary services. Many primary care professionals receive minimal training on ME—I did not get a lot of training on this when I was a nurse—and are therefore occasionally prone to holding stigmatising and misinformed opinions about the illness. It is clear that more training is required, not only for healthcare professionals but for welfare assessors. Welfare assessors frequently have insufficient understanding of ME and therefore often fail to assess claimants accurately. I heard that a lot at the film screening.

It is completely unacceptable that people suffering from ME are, through no fault of their own, even more harshly exposed to the cruelties of Tory welfare cuts and the disastrous roll-out of universal credit. This Government must consider properly funding research into ME to better understand the condition. It is crucial that we all work towards eradicating the stigma of ME and improve routes to diagnosis, care and treatment. It is also crucial that all Members across this House recognise that that can only be achieved with adequate resources. I hope that today the Minister will give us a real commitment to do this, and not just warm but empty words.

4.19 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) not only on securing this important debate but on her tireless work, with others, to raise awareness of the difficulties that individuals with ME
endure; on relentlessly challenging authorities to improve the way in which they support sufferers; and on giving a voice to those who all too often feel abandoned and alone.

As we know, ME is a chronic, multi-system disease that impacts approximately a quarter of a million people across the UK. To put that number into context, ME affects more people than the terrible Parkinson’s disease and multiple sclerosis combined. It is estimated, as has been mentioned, that it has an economic cost of some £3.3 billion. One would imagine that those considerations alone were sufficient to ensure adequate funding for biomedical research into ME and clinical care for those suffering from the disease, and yet ME research represents just 0.02% of all active grants given by UK mainstream funding agencies. It really does beggar belief that research into an affliction that leaves 25% of sufferers housebound or bedbound, and from which 95% of people do not recover, receives so little funding. This underinvestment needs to be addressed urgently, and I hope that the Minister can help in this regard. I also support a review of NICE guidelines on the treatments prescribed for ME and hope that that can be implemented as soon as possible. If positive changes are adopted, I hope, of course, that they are, in turn, implemented by the Welsh Government so that ME sufferers in Wales can benefit.

It is near impossible for those of us fortunate enough to not suffer from ME to truly comprehend its real, tangible impact, so I would like to conclude with the words of two individuals who have contacted me to share their experiences of the disease. John Peters suffers from ME and was first struck down in the 1980s. The impact on his life has been total, as he so painfully put it to me:

“I have missed the whole spectrum of life: the big things such as family, a career; holidays, celebrations, the ‘hooks’ of someone’s years; but also the minor events—that night out with a friend, the moment on a mountain, the lazy morning in bed with someone, that fantastic book, the sharing of a joke.”

Saran, a teenager from Ceredigion, has suffered from ME for over a decade and is now mostly housebound after receiving a formal diagnosis only last year. She told me:

“I have no idea what a life without chronic pain is, I don’t know what it’s like to be able to tolerate noisy bright spaces, what it’s like to remember the conversations I’ve had with those I love…I have slowly watched my life disappear over many years, and now I’m entirely dependent on my parents, have no job, A levels, or hope for the future.”

I sincerely hope that this debate succeeds in its objectives, for we simply cannot wait any longer. John and Saran deserve some hope for the future.

4.22 pm

Liz Twist (Blyth) (Lab): I thank the many constituents who have contacted me about their experiences, asking me to take part in this debate. In particular, I thank Pauline Donaldson of the Tyne and Wear ME/CFS support group, who plays a really important part in making sure that I and other Members from Tyne and Wear are aware of the very real problems faced by people who have this debilitating condition.

It is six months since we last debated this issue in Westminster Hall. That is six months more that people with ME have been waiting to see real progress on finding effective biomedical research into ME to work towards finding effective treatments for their condition, and six months more to suffer from the effects of ME. They are weary and impatient, and angry that treatments like CBT and graded exercise—psychological treatments—are still being put forward as the most common treatment for what is a physical condition. I am glad to take this opportunity to speak on their behalf.

Those people are looking for four things, the first of which is funding for biomedical research. I was shocked to hear that patients and families are helping to fund research themselves. It is really important that we find a way of having that biomedical research done through public funds.

Secondly, many people with ME and their supporters have demanded that the use of CBT and graded exercise therapy be stopped. I will come on to talk about my constituent’s experience of that. Thirdly, they want to see more training for GPs in recognising the signs and symptoms of ME. Invest in ME Research is doing much and has information packs, but it does not have the funds to extend that medical training everywhere. Fourthly, they would like to see an end to families with children with ME being subject to child protection procedures.

To finish, I want to talk about my constituent Angus, who was a senior lecturer in business at a north-east university. He says:

“In 2012, every aspect of my life changed when I was struck down with ME aged 47.”

He lost his job. He says that he was never a “couch potato”—in fact, just the opposite—and still loves active pursuits, but can no longer do any of them. He says:

“Climbing the stairs in the house seems more exhausting than any mountain I’ve climbed in the past.”

He underwent CBT and GET and found that it made him not better but so much worse that it was a relapse. I wish I had the time to read his evidence. It is crucial that we address this problem and give our constituents with ME the treatment they deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—
need to develop new initiatives and additional forms of individualised treatment. She spoke of the need for new therapeutic strategies and multi-centre interventions, given the fluctuating nature of the condition. She also spoke of the need for more Government-funded research and said:

“We will wait as we do now in the hope that today will be the day you listen, take note and do something to help us all.”

I would also like to pay tribute to my constituent Reg Hann, who contacted me about his grandson and made these moving comments:

“I have had a close relationship with him all his life. Now he is too ill to travel to visit me. Too ill to speak on the phone... He is 18 at the beginning of February and will be unable to celebrate such an important birthday. I will be 95 the week after. My best present would be if he is well enough to visit me.”

What Reg and Sarah need is action. I hope they get the action that they deserve.

4.27 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for bringing forward this debate, and for all the work she has invested in bringing the subject to the House and raising Members’ awareness of it.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I have had a close relationship with him all his life. Now he is too ill to travel to visit me. Too ill to speak on the phone... He is 18 at the beginning of February and will be unable to celebrate such an important birthday. I will be 95 the week after. My best present would be if he is well enough to visit me.”

I have also been contacted by other constituents who have urged me to take part in this debate. One of them is Rebecca Pritchard, who points out that it would not be possible for her to be here, but that she very strongly urges me to take part in this debate. One of them is a young undergraduate in human bioscience, studying immunology, and for all the work she has invested in bringing the subject to the House and raising Members’ awareness of it.

4.29 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I have a very short time, but I hope this debate will raise awareness of this condition. It is still an illness that people very often do not know much about, despite the fact that 250,000 people in the UK are affected by it, with about 20,000 of those living in Scotland. Despite all this, there are still no effective treatments for this life-changing, life-stealing and cruel condition. We need our frontline GPs to have proper training so they feel equipped to diagnose and are more confident in the treatment of this condition.

Although recent investment by the Scottish Government is very welcome, it is nothing more than a start for this very long-neglected and misunderstood condition. I am keen to hear what action the UK Government will take to increase awareness and understanding of this condition, and to help us understand the causes of the illness, so that we can improve its diagnosis and treatment.

Having listened to speeches from across the House, I have no doubt that we need a concerted effort right across the UK to tackle this illness. I very much look forward to hearing the response from the Minister. Before I sit down, I want to extend my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for bringing forward this debate, and for all the work she has invested in bringing the subject to the House and raising Members’ awareness of it.

4.31 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Given the very short period available, I will not be able to do justice to Karen, Carolyn, Nathalie, Anna, Emma or many of my other constituents by telling their stories today. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), I tell my constituents and all those watching, “The House has heard you and your stories, and understands your plight.” The will of the House will make that very clear to those on the Government Front Bench.

It is clear from the stories we have heard today what a devastating and complex disease this is. When I was a young undergraduate in human bioscience, studying immunology, I heard this referred to in the labs as “Multiple Excuses”, and that was not so long ago. There is clear evidence that much more work is needed on the biomedical and biological processes behind this complex and devastating disease.

I am a member of the Science and Technology Committee, and we have recently completed an inquiry into research integrity. We have some concerns about reporting and transparency, especially in clinical trials. This goes to the concerns of many ME sufferers about what research is being done and how it is being done. Further to our Select Committee inquiry, I hope that the Minister will say what he will do to provide transparency in prospective registration, to deal with positive bias in journals—researchers are incentivised to find positive answers, as opposed to proving negatives, which is sometimes just as important—and perhaps to change the culture of that environment.

Lastly, on the delivery of care, about which we have heard from many hon. Members, the research must be recognised in the NICE guidelines, which lead to the delivery of care for many sufferers—children and adults—and to some of these heartbreaking situations. In my final 10 seconds, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), a colleague on the Science and Technology Committee. I was pleased
to support her application for this debate, and I hope the Government will respond in the significant way that is needed.

4.33 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for securing this very important debate. I have received a number of requests from my constituents to attend this debate to highlight this devastating condition.

Sufferers of ME are often stigmatised and marginalised, as their conditions are not fully recognised by the Government or the medical profession. A number of my constituents suffer from ME. At least two have been bedridden for 30 years because of their condition, and their story is not uncommon. Some 250,000 people suffer from ME, with 25% of individuals house or bed-bound. Children as young as five can develop the condition, and it is the most common cause of long-term school sickness absences.

A Westminster Hall debate last February raised issues about the PACE trial, which has influenced the NHS treatment of ME. A report had recommended CBT and GET as effective treatments. More recent research has disproved that study, which shows that CBT is not effective, and that GET can worsen individual symptoms, as has been the case for some of my constituents. However, those are the only treatments available on the NHS, which means that individuals and their families must endure treatment that not only fails to improve them, but can worsen their condition.

I therefore support suspending CBT and GET treatments in the NHS, as well as updated training for GPs and medical professionals, to alleviate the unnecessary hardship to which individuals with ME are currently subjected. ME has been overlooked for too long. We must fund and support research properly, and work to ensure that those who suffer from ME are listened to, diagnosed, and treated in the best possible way.

4.35 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) on securing this debate. She has been a champion for those who suffer from ME. We thank her for all her efforts, and are here to support her.

I have had the pleasure of meeting a lady in my constituency who is attempting to cope with her illness. She is also a champion for raising awareness and changing how those who suffer from ME are dealt with—I say “suffer”, because the lady I met certainly suffers. It is estimated that ME affects some 25,000 children in the UK, and it is said to be the leading cause of long-term school sickness absence in the UK. Given the stigma that people with ME face, families will continue to meet accusations of misconduct and withholding support. What is being done to help those 25,000 children?

We urgently need to update the training of GPs and medical professionals, so that they are equipped with clear guidance for a diagnosis of ME, and can give advice and guidance on appropriate management to reflect international consensus on best practice. In addition, all commissioning bodies must ensure that medical, welfare and care services are accessible to people with ME, including home visits for those severely affected.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West said, not much has changed. I still have constituents with ME who are turned down for the personal independence payment, even though they are unable to leave the house for 29 days in a month. People are removed from employment and support allowance and told to go to job interviews, even if they cannot manage to stand in the shower, let alone leave the house or get a job. It is time to move past the idea that if something cannot be tested it cannot be helped.

This debilitating illness takes its toll on men, women and children throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and we simply must do better by them. I would appreciate a response from the Minister on whether there are any plans to do better. If such plans are not in place, when will they be introduced? The 400 sufferers of ME in my constituency request such plans—indeed, they demand them.

4.37 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I thank my constituents who have written to me to share their experiences, both as patients and parents. I also have a close friend who has battled this condition for 18 years. I know that many sufferers find it dismissive to refer to the condition as chronic fatigue syndrome because it sounds so trivial. At very least it should be chronic exhaustion syndrome, because that is what it is—absolute exhaustion. ME affects a quarter of a million people, 10% of whom are children and young people. A quarter of those are so severely affected that they are either housebound or bedbound.

The basic problem is that we do not know the cause of ME. It often seems to start post-viral; I, no doubt like many others here, have had post-viral syndrome, and it can often take weeks or even months to recover from. What is it about ME sufferers that makes the condition become long-term and chronic? That is the crux of the matter. We need biomedical research to consider whether it is an autoimmune cause, a genetic weakness, or a neurological problem. Is it metabolic? There is some interest in whether the mitochondria—the little power packs in the cells—are at fault. Such things need to be considered, and at the moment the only real funding of research is by ME charities.

The UK has not funded any biomedical research since 2012. That makes diagnosis problematic because it is based only on symptoms. We do not have a test because we do not know the cause or what to test for. Naturally enough, I will stick up for doctors and say, “That makes it kinda hard for them.” It becomes a diagnosis of elimination—when they do not find the other obvious causes, the symptoms are put down to ME.

Following on from that, there is simply no treatment. There is no cure because we do not know the cause. There are no drugs coming down the pipeline, no procedures. That means that we are dependent purely on management and support. As has been said, CBT is not a cure or a treatment. It may help some people cope with the depression and mental health issues that come from being so disabled, but it does not tackle the underlying ME.

As has been said, graded exercise can actually make things much worse. The suggestion that it might work was based, as has been said, on the flawed PACE trial published in The Lancet in 2011. I think it is quite
sinister that some of the funding for that trial was from the Department for Work and Pensions; that added to the implication of malingering, despite the fact that 90% of sufferers were working before they were diagnosed. That figure drops to 35% afterwards. It was an unblinded study, because it is not possible to hide from people what treatment they are getting. That means that all other aspects should be very strict, yet CBT and GET were promoted to patients as something that would help them. The researchers did not analyse their planned outcomes, which is critical in research. They lowered their defined targets simply because the treatment was failing, and used subjective rather than objective measures. Re-analysis of the PACE study has shown minimal benefit to these treatments; indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, some people got worse but still had their treatment classified as a success.

The only thing that has been shown to make a difference to some patients is what is called adaptive pacing—listening to one's body, balancing activity with rest, and planning one's day, or one's weekend activities with the family.

The United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention removed the recommendations of CBT and GET, but as has been said, they have still been NICE recommendations since 2007, and although they are under review, with the results due to come out in 2020—too far away—the NICE website still promotes CBT and GET. There should be a red warning, saying, “Don’t follow this. We are looking into it.”

Most of all, we need research to define the underlying cause of this condition, and to develop treatments. We have heard about the £300,000 of funding that the Scottish Government have given to Action for ME to develop peer support projects, but research needs to be on a bigger scale, considering the £3.3 billion economic impact. The US has moved to biomedical research and, as has been said, the UK is still totally focused on psychological research.

In the meantime, until we have answers, the DWP needs to recognise the impact and the disability of ME. GPs, NHS staff and care staff need to provide support, including emotional support, to help manage the condition, and all of us need to recognise the impact of the condition and reduce the stigma that simply adds insult to injury.

4.42 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I start by thanking the hon. Members for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) for securing this important debate. I thank all hon. Members who spoke; it was great that so many did so. Due to time, I shall not list them all.

I thank the charities—MEAction, Action for ME, the ME Association, the M.E. Trust and ME North East—and all the patients who have been in touch with me to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences of living with ME. The ME Association estimates that approximately 250,000 people in Britain are affected by ME; we have heard plenty of moving stories about those individuals today. However, an article published in the British Medical Journal in July 2018 reported that 90% of cases are thought to go undiagnosed, and that people with ME are substantially undercounted, underdiagnosed and undertreated. As we have heard, patients are often passed from pillar to post with dismissals and misdiagnoses, and sometimes left waiting over a year for a diagnosis. I am sure the Minister does not need me to tell him that that does not meet NICE guidelines of diagnosis within four months of the onset of symptoms. The Government should therefore do more, and considering that they are not doing much for patients with ME at the moment, I do not think that that is too much to ask.

The Government do not fund research and clinical care for people with ME at the rate they do for other serious prevalent diseases. As we have heard, the average spent on research for a person living with ME is just £1 a year. According to Action for ME, that represents just 0.02% of all active grants given by the mainstream UK funding agencies. I am therefore concerned that the Government recently confirmed in a written answer that ME research funding is lower now than it was even in 2013–14.

Current treatments of graded exercise therapy and cognitive behaviour therapy have been found to be harmful to patients with ME, and continue the narrative of disbelief and neglect of them, which we have heard about from a number of hon. Members. NICE has already recognised that its guidelines are outdated, and that patients do not receive the full picture on recommended treatments. NICE is updating its clinical guidance on the diagnosis and management of ME, but that is not expected to be published until October 2020. Patients and their families have already waited long enough, so will the Minister work with patients, charities, researchers and NICE to ensure that treatment and care for ME is appropriate?

We have heard today why funding for biomedical research into ME is so desperately needed. According to MEAction, the only year in which the Medical Research Council invested any meaningful sum in biomedical research was 2012, when £1.5 million of funds were ring-fenced. However, no funds have been allocated for biomedical ME research since then.

In the Westminster Hall debate in June last year, I called on the Government to consider funding research, because it is long overdue. Will the Minister commit to doing that today, or will the Government continue to leave it up to the charity sector to do so? Projects such as Invest in ME Research, which has four PhD students researching ME, have been financially supported by patients and their families via crowdfunding in excess of £870,000. That is fantastic, but it should not be left to patients to crowd fund research. More funding for research will enhance healthcare professionals and clinicians’ understanding of ME, which will improve the patient experience and debunk the myths of ME being a primarily psychological condition, as we have heard about today. Clinicians must have access to up-to-date research and information so that they can give patients the best possible care and advice.

In some areas, however, that is not the case, as Jennifer Elliot, the CEO of ME North East, has brought to my attention. Jennifer told me of the diminished services available to patients with ME in the north-east region. There are no services at all for young people with ME in the entire north-east. Adult services in Sunderland are closed to patients altogether, and have been for some
months, with no date for them to be reinstated. For 20 years, ME North East has been doing all it can to help and support ME patients but, with a severe lack of funding, it is now at crisis point. I am sure that other regions have similar stories, as we have heard today, so will the Minister please consider the loss of services in his response? Will he ensure that the services are reinstated and supported financially by the Government?

Finally, we must ensure that the stigma of ME is tackled. Funding and research will help, but it cannot be right that, as found last year, more than one in five families caring for a child with ME have been referred for child protection proceedings due to school absences and a lack of understanding by the school, as we have heard. I am pleased that the vast majority of those accusations are dismissed in less than a year, but the added stress and burden to families with children suffering with ME can be overwhelming. We therefore need more funding for research, so that we can understand, care for and treat ME, and break down the stigma.

4.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): The two-minute limit produced an impressive result, showing what can be done in the Chamber, but let me issue a plea to the Backbench Business Committee. I know it is unusual for Ministers to make comments like this, but I reckon that sometimes doing less and doing it better is preferable to trying to squeeze two really important debates into a very short space of time. Perhaps the Committee will listen to my plea.

I thank those who have contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nickly Morgan), the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who spoke in his usual style, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), whom I have heard mention her constituent before, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), who I thought gave the best speech—the prize goes to him—and the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin).

I also, of course, thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for introducing the debate. I think I am right in saying that this is the third debate on this subject that she has tabled and been granted in the last 12 months. I applaud her dedication, and her passion for ensuring that awareness of ME is kept very high. I echo the thanks given by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) to all the charities that are working in this space, and I welcome the ladies from the Millions Missing campaign who are in the Public Gallery. I thank them for coming to listen to our debate; I am sorry that it has been so rushed.

The Government do not for one minute underestimate ME. As we heard from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), the truth is that we do not understand the underlying causes, and there is no single diagnostic test to identify it. Although some patients—very few—improve and recover, there is currently no cure. We know that the condition has a devastating impact, and we have heard some stories about that today. It has a complex range of symptoms which cause great difficulties for physicians, including disabling fatigue, a flu-like malaise and neurological problems. We have also heard about the effect on families, friends, carers, schools and housing.

No one mentioned the powerful film “Unrest” today, so let me mention it briefly in passing. It won an award at the Sundance film festival a couple of years ago. That was a powerful presentation, if ever I saw one, of the impact that ME can have on people’s lives. I will not say any more about it, because last time I did so someone accused me of doing a film review instead of responding to the debate—which I think was slightly harsh, but that is what social media does for you. I thought that the hon. Member for Ceredigion, who is still in the Chamber, put it very well: although we give constituents’ stories in this place, we cannot for one minute begin to understand what it must be like to suffer from this condition. Those who have seen the film will know that it literally puts people flat on their backs, sometimes for years.

We have heard a lot about the medical profession today, and I think—the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire touched on this—that the profession has had a bad rap, some of it deserved. As we have heard, the difficulties in diagnosis mean that patients with ME often experience great delays in receiving the treatment and support that they require. Recognising the need for GPs to be aware of the condition, the Royal College of General Practitioners includes it as a vital area of clinical knowledge that GPs should have as part of their qualifying exams, featuring it in the guidance for the applied knowledge test, which is a key part of those exams.

The RCGP has also produced an online course on ME for GPs. It highlights many of the common misconceptions, and considers the challenges for primary care professionals that surround this complex condition. Nevertheless, once they are qualified, clinicians are responsible for ensuring that their own clinical knowledge remains up to date—it is not for Ministers to go on educating GPs; that is one of the jobs of the RCGP—and for their ongoing learning. I made clear in the last debate, and I will make clear again, that that activity should continue, and should take into account new research and developments in guidance such as that produced and updated by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West said that people felt that they had been fobbed off. They should never be fobbed off by the medical profession, and I should be very concerned to hear of any examples of that.

Steve Brine: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bailey: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: No, I will not, because everyone had a chance to speak and wanted the Minister to respond.
As I have said, I think that GPs have had a hard rap this afternoon. Before the debate I spoke to Helen Stokes-Lampard, who chairs the RCGP, because I anticipated that that would happen. I asked her whether she would be willing to come to the House if I were to facilitate a roundtable—perhaps involving the all-party parliamentary group on myalgic encephalomyelitis, which we hope will be reconstituted, but certainly involving the sponsors of today’s debate. She is very willing to do that, and I think it would be a positive development. If the hon. Member for Glasgow North West would like to be part of that, perhaps we can get in touch and make it happen. The door will be open.

The NICE guidance is clear on a number of important points. There is no one form of treatment to suit every patient; that is self-evident. The needs and preferences of patients should absolutely be taken into account. Doctors should explain that no single strategy will be successful for all patients, which is a hallmark of this condition. In common with people receiving any NHS care, ME patients have the absolute right to refuse or withdraw from any part of their treatment; nobody is making this happen. Those with severe symptoms may require access to a wider range of support, managed by a specialist.

NICE guidance supports commissioners to plan, fund and deliver ME services. As we have heard in this debate, and in others secured by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West, the use of CBT and GET in treating ME has long been controversial for patient groups, charities and some clinicians, who are very divided on this condition—understatement of the afternoon, perhaps. That began with the publication of the NICE guidance in 2007, and continued with the PACE trial. However, as Members clearly, from what I have heard this afternoon, know, NICE is updating the ME guidance and will examine the concerns about the PACE trial and whether there are implications for its current recommendations.

The updated guidance is due, but sadly not until October next year, and until then the existing guidance will remain current. I will look into the request made by the hon. Lady and others for an early statement. She is very willing to do that, and I think it would be a positive development. If the hon. Member for Glasgow North West would like to be part of that, perhaps we can get in touch and make it happen. The door will be open.

I want to give the hon. Member for Glasgow North West a chance to conclude, but I thank her for raising the issue again on behalf of those affected, including many of my constituents who have contacted me asking if I would be able to attend today’s debate; I was able to say, “Yeah, there’s a fairly good chance that I will pop in.” One of the Whips present on the Treasury Bench, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), asked me to mention her constituent, Rosalind Amor, who has been in touch with her many times on this subject.

The Government fully recognise the strength of feeling on this issue, as we do for all those living with conditions and disorders which research is unable yet to help us fully understand. That is why we remain fully committed to delivering significant investment in our research programmes and infrastructure, but we need people to come forward with quality proposals.

4.59 pm

Carol Monaghan: I thank all Members who have stayed behind once again on a Thursday afternoon, particularly the Members who sponsored the debate, and especially the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake). I also thank the ME community for their lobbying and presence here today in the Gallery, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate. We had some very clear asks for the Minister, which he has responded to in part. On the question of medical research, I am sure that many researchers will have heard what he said. However, it is notable that although there is some excellent biomedical research going on just now, it is being funded by charities, and not by the Government. The Government need to take this seriously.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House calls on the Government to provide increased funding for biomedical research for the diagnosis and treatment of ME; supports the suspension of Graded Exercise Therapy and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy as means of treatment; supports updated training of GPs and medical professionals to ensure they are equipped with clear guidance on the diagnosis of ME and appropriate management advice to reflect international consensus on best practice; and is concerned about the current trends of subjecting ME families to unjustified child protection procedures.

Karen Lee: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did actually mention the film “Unrest”, and I am sure that Hansom will bear me out on that. My constituents would never forgive me if I did not point that out.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady clearly appreciates that that is not a point of order, but she has corrected the record and, as she says, I am sure that Hansard will bear her out.

Just before we adjourn the House, I am afraid that once again I have to inform the House of a further correction to the number of votes for Members for English constituencies in the Division on Lords amendment 36 to the Tenant Fees Bill yesterday. There was a technical hitch at that time, and the figures were announced as: Ayes 261, Noes 194. The figures should have been: Ayes 263, Noes 194. The result is unaffected, but the record has been put straight.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, I must start by declaring an interest: I am a Newcastle United fan. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you. When I raised this with the House authorities, I was told I did not need to declare it as I “derived no real benefit” from it. I would dispute that. Supporting Newcastle United has brought me great joy, and a sense of belonging, shared purpose and community, as well as the opportunity to watch the beautiful game at its beautiful best in that cathedral to football, St James’ Park. But it has also brought me deep despair and disappointment, particularly in the last few years. I also wanted to present myself in my Newcastle team shirt today, but I was told in no uncertain terms that that was not allowed. Instead, I have settled for a Newcastle Libraries T-shirt with our city on it.

Newcastle United is at the heart of the city. Unlike Liverpool or London, we have only one professional football team and we are united in our support. And what support it is! Hon. Members may recall that, back when we had regional development authorities and investment in our regions, the One NorthEast tourism slogan was “Passionate people, passionate places”. Well, the passion of Newcastle is football. We have consistently high attendances—some of the highest in the league until recent times—and the economy of the city is influenced by the success on the pitch. If we are winning, we are singing—and spending. If we are losing, the gloom hovers over all our heads like individual storm clouds. It is part of our culture.

Anyone who moves to Newcastle—and we certainly have an unparalleled quality of life, so I recommend that everyone does so—will find it an open, welcoming and warm city, but whereas elsewhere people might get away with talking about the weather, in Newcastle they will need to know how the Toon are doing. It is part of our mental wellbeing—90 minutes spent at the Gallowgate end would be enough to convince anyone of that—and this is true not only in Newcastle, as my hon. Friends—and fellow fans—the Members for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) can attest. They would have liked to be here today.

Football is the lifeblood of many cities, particularly in the north, and that remains the case despite changes that have seen money, not fans, become the driving force of football thanks to the creation of the Premier League and billions of pounds from Sky Sports. While I will speak mainly about Newcastle United football club, its finances and its owner, much of what I say applies to football as a whole.

Since 2008, Newcastle United has been owned by Mike Ashley, who also owns Sports Direct, House of Fraser and several other retail businesses. In July last year, I presented a petition reflecting the concerns of fans groups, such as If Rafa Goes We Go and the Magpie Group, and that caught the attention of Mr. Ashley, something which I had been unable to do as the MP for St James’ Park, despite writing to him to ask for a meeting. It is testimony to the power of Parliament...
that, after announcing this debate, I was able to meet Mr Ashley on Saturday. I committed to Mr Ashley that I would make no personal attacks on him—I will not avail myself of parliamentary privilege to do so—and I say to all the fans that personal attacks on Mr Ashley or his employees are wrong and hurt our cause.

I shared with Mr Ashley my concerns about financial transparency and funding, and he was passionate in his defence of his investments and in saying that he has not taken any money out of the club other than, he said, short-term funding on a temporary basis. That, he said, was in contrast with the period prior to his ownership. He also emphasised that he had made it clear the club must stand on its own two feet and can spend only the money it generates. Well, to put it diplomatically, we disagreed. The meeting was open, frank and robust, with strong views on both sides, and I hope to continue the dialogue. Indeed, this debate is part of that dialogue. It has to be, because I have still to receive a reply to my letter of last year in which I raised several critical issues that I have also raised in correspondence with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the previous Sports Minister, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch).

Mr Ashley said that the club can spend only what it generates—a form of austerity economics of which those on the Tory Benches could be proud—but Newcastle United needs investment to reach its potential. Earnings have been hit by uncertainty and the bad feeling between fans and the owner, but even if we accept what he says, how are we to know what income the club generates? As the Secretary of State said in his letter to me, clubs are treated as any other private business and must submit accounts to Companies House. I am not an accountant, but I have an MA in business administration, studied corporate finance and worked in business for 20 years. However, I have looked at the NUFC accounts and cannot work out what is going on.

Faith in Newcastle’s accounts has not been helped by comments made by Mr Ashley at the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee last December, when he said:

“People cheat. That is what businesses do.”

He also said:

“Accountants are able—this is their job, by the way—to move the numbers about pretty much at will.”

That seems to be what is happening at Newcastle. Mr Ashley’s ownership of the club passes through four separate companies: Mash Holdings, St James Holdings, Newcastle United and Newcastle United Football Holdings. In addition, dozens of other companies are associated with the club and Mike Ashley, and managing director Lee Charnley has more than 30 other directorships. Newcastle United’s accounts do not include a cash flow statement, although having one is a requirement of reputable accounting. All that seems designed to make it harder to follow the money and see what income is being generated.

I hope that the Minister will agree that that is unacceptable and that she will commit to ensuring that the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million, the following income streams can be identified. First, TV payments. These should be more than £123 million.
north-east and is, in part, funded by the club, although again that funding is not transparent. The Premier League also uses some of its vast wealth for the benefit of local communities, at least what can be spared from expenditure such as its £5 million farewell gift to departing executive chairman Richard Scudamore.

Neither Newcastle United nor the Premier League consider themselves to be accountable to fans. As many constituents have made clear to me, fans feel powerless before the slow destruction of what we believe in. Newcastle United is the beating heart of our city, and we should be able to protect it.

That goes to the heart of the matter. Why is it that a person can buy a stately home in the wilds of Wiltshire and not be able to change even a window frame, but they can buy Newcastle United, which is in the heart of Newcastle, and strip it of its assets without so much as an eyebrow being raised? Why is football left largely to regulate itself when other businesses, from pubs to social media companies, must meet social requirements?

I know that the Minister recognises the importance of football clubs and the custodian role of owners, because she said so during the recent debate on Coventry City. Will she now put that recognition into action? Will she launch an inquiry into the reporting requirements of the top flight clubs, using Newcastle United as a test case? Will she ensure that that inquiry answers the financial questions that I have raised? Will she ensure that supporters have a voice on football club boards, as Labour has called for? Will she make reputable custodianship a requirement of club ownership? The fit and proper person test is clearly not fit for purpose.

It is with great sadness that I say that I have come to the conclusion that football is broken. Its governance has not kept pace with its income, and money has won over sport. We cannot turn back the clock, but we can put in place effective regulation so that financial transparency enables the beautiful game’s true splendour to shine forth once more.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) not only on her outfit, but on securing this wonderful and important debate. I was wearing black and white shoes this morning, and I thought I might consider myself to be accountable to fans. As many constituents have made clear to me, fans feel powerless before the slow destruction of what we believe in. Newcastle United is the beating heart of our city, and we should be able to protect it.

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Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for what she has said, and I echo her comments. I was at St James’s Park to see Cardiff City last week. It must be a terrible time for the family and friends, and for Cardiff City fans.

Mims Davies: I turn to the points that have been raised in this debate. Newcastle United are 17th in the Premier League, with some uncertainty about the manager and no signings so far in the transfer window, but last week they had a good win in the FA Cup. I would like to say that not all football clubs are feeling that pain, but there are others at the bottom of the Premier League, including Cardiff, Fulham, Burnley, Huddersfield, Southampton and Crystal Palace. I have to declare an interest when it comes to Southampton, which is very near to my constituency and has many fans. I also understand the impact on the economy when they are not winning.

I am surprised not to see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) here, because we are talking about football—I am surprised not to be interrupted by him. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) spoke about the love and affection in north Walsall for the football club there. I was in that area recently to visit a local school, and there was huge affection for the club. The area has so much to look forward to with the Commonwealth Games. It is not all doom and gloom.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I have to confess that I am here under slightly false pretences. I came to take part in a debate about a fantastic football club that wears black and white stripy jerseys and black shorts, only to discover that it was Newcastle United, not my own Halstead Town football club. The passion that the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) displayed for her local team is matched by the passion I display for mine, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to take part, briefly, in this debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am not sure it is in order for the hon. Gentleman just to mention a team because they play in black and white like Epping Town.

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) for reminding me of the importance of the grassroots. We had an important debate earlier in the week about facilities and what the grassroots mean to football up and down the land. We need to make sure we protect our stadiums and our future stars.

The Government wholeheartedly agree that football should absolutely be supported and that fans have every right to ask questions about those who run their clubs. We saw protests at Bolton earlier this week, and at Blackpool and Charlton in recent times. Such protests demonstrate the discontent that can exist when fans believe that the ownership is not working in the best interests of the club at all times. Over recent years, the Government have invested significant time in finding ways to improve the relationship that fans have with their clubs. We want to see owners working with fans and seeing them as an integral part of their clubs’ successes, and I want all fans to see that, up and down the game.

The Government’s expert working group on football supporter ownership and engagement, which reported in 2016, resulted in an important rule change in football. All clubs in the top four divisions must now ensure that there is open dialogue between the owners and senior executives and the fans on the matters of most importance to the running of clubs. These meetings must now take place each season, and they are leading the way in enabling fans to be better informed about their club’s
financial standing, future plans and other matters of real importance to them so that they can help to set the agenda.

Last summer, the Government took a further step in listening to fans’ concerns when we asked the FA to carry out a comprehensive review of the ownership of football clubs and stadiums. The intention of the review is to learn why many of our clubs have become separated from the ownership of their homes, so that going forward we can advise clubs and fans on how they can work together to protect these important community assets.

The issues came into sharp focus with the problems at Dulwich Hamlet, but the problems of clubs becoming entangled in land and development disputes are not exclusive to non-league clubs. As we have heard, they can occur across all levels of football. With the help of the Secretary of State, we are working to help to find a solution for the fans of Coventry City.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will know that I was very involved in Coventry in my previous life. It is not necessarily about whether the club owns its stadium—in fact, in Coventry, it is the council ownership that has protected the stadium for football—but whether the owners really have the fans at heart. There have been many cases in which they have not, which is why we need a review of the structure and of how fans engage, not only in Coventry and Newcastle, but in Torquay.

Mims Davies: Absolutely, and I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. His interest in this goes back some time—[Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) behind me raises the importance of Bury Town to Bury St Edmunds. These clubs really do matter to our communities and, as I said, that was very much the focus of the debate earlier in the week.

When it comes to club ownership, the football authorities have been progressive in recent years. They have needed to be to react to the huge investment and interest that there now is across the world in owning our football clubs. In our top four football leagues, the rules now require public disclosure of the ultimate beneficial owners of all clubs, with the full chain of ownership disclosed to the relevant football authority. The current owners and directors test has been strengthened, and it bears favourable comparison with that expected in corporate circles.

New owners have to meet the Premier League or English Football League board and provide detail on the sources and sufficiency of the funding they have in place. Clubs must submit information on their financial structure, any proposed investment and a business plan demonstrating that all liabilities can be met for the next 12 months, and clubs must submit independently audited accounts each season. If these are not filed at Companies House, clubs should take steps to ensure that they are. Clubs must also continue to work with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs over any tax owed. Together with the adoption of fair pay rules, the financial state of football clubs in this country is better now than at any time in the last 20 years, but I take the points made by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central about income streams, shop sales, player sales and the other wide-ranging issues she raised, and I will be happy to send her a fuller response afterwards. I want to reassure her, however, that we are not complacent.

The football authorities should not be complacent either. In my regular meetings with them, I will look for further assurances that they continue to review the rules constantly, ensure ongoing transparency around the ownership of clubs, make sufficient inquiries into the suitability of owners and ensure that, financially, our clubs continue to live within their means. The football authorities have agreed to keep the owner and director test under regular review and to listen to supporters’ concerns about club ownership. I will also be asking for an update on the role of the FA’s regulatory authority, which was set up in 2012 in response to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and Government regulation around the game’s governance.

The football authorities need to take a good look at the rules and judge impartially whether clubs are in compliance. There are existing structures, but if we need to go further, I will be unafraid to give an additional appropriate focus. I will also be listening to supporters’ groups. I know that the general cost of travelling and attending games must be kept under constant review, and I will continue to look for a fair deal for fans. I appreciate that football is heavily reliant on broadcasting contracts, but clubs must consider their fans when it comes to scheduling matches and changes to kick-off times.

I come now to the fortunes to Newcastle United. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central will be keen to hear this. We can all agree that this is one of our biggest and best-supported clubs, and the city, adorned in black and white, is one of the most visible and wonderful of sights. St James’ Park sits loud and proud in the centre of the city. Newcastle is a city that loves its football club and wants the very best for it, as we have heard today. Part of the case made today is that Newcastle United is currently in the hands of someone who is not a lifelong fan. If we looked at other clubs, we would probably find that plenty of owners did not meet this traditional expectation, but that does not mean they are running their clubs badly or unsustainably or without taking a huge interest in the clubs succeeding.

As the Government set out in response to the petition the hon. Lady presented last summer, to the best of our knowledge Newcastle’s owner is complying with all the financial reporting and ownership criteria I ran through earlier, but I have a list of responses to come back to. The club is also meeting its obligation to engage with supporters and discuss matters important to the running of the club. That does not mean, however, that Mr Ashley, or any other owner for that matter, could not go further than simply complying with the league rules. There is always room for progress.

Mr Ashley has made no secret of the fact that he is looking to sell the club, but until such time as he does, he remains the person responsible for its custodianship. Like every owner, his primary responsibility is to ensure that the club is financially secure, and despite the concerns raised, I am certain that Mr Ashley is shrewd enough to understand that if he wants to sell the club and realise its best value, he needs to look after it.

In summary, it is important that the issues of most concern to football fans continue to be heard. I will continue to listen to supporters up and down the land about their concerns over ownership, and will be meeting the Unified Football Supporters’ Organisation on 5 March.
I will continue to work to hold the football authorities to account, and we must ensure that there is continued assessment of the regulations that are in place. We must continue to encourage good ownership, proper financial reporting and meaningful dialogue with supporters. We must support our grassroots, working with the Premier League, and make sure that we have a pipeline of young footballers coming into the game. I have not mentioned women footballers and other areas in relation to participation. I take the concerns very seriously. I will write to the hon. Lady on all those points, and I thank her for the opportunity to respond to this Adjournment debate this afternoon.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We could possibly wish good luck to every team that plays in black and white. That is not in order, but there we are. Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—
Homelessness: Death Rates

1. Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the death rate among homeless people.

2. Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the death rate among homeless people.

3. Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the death rate among homeless people.

4. James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the issues of mental health and addiction, with a much higher proportion of people who are rough sleeping having those particular needs. That is why in the NHS long-term plan there was the commitment for an extra £30 million designed specifically for health support for rough sleepers, because sometimes access can be really difficult. We are determined to ensure that that type of support is able to be provided to rough sleepers.

5. Anna McMorrin: We know that homelessness is getting worse. According to Shelter, 36 new people become homeless every day. One way to address this is to make more social housing available. To do that, England should be suspending the right to buy as we have already done in Wales. Does the Secretary of State agree?

6. James Brokenshire: I do agree that we require more social housing. That is why we have our affordable housing programme. We have also already taken off the restrictions on councils in England to enable them to borrow to build a new generation of council homes. [Interruption.] I would just point out to Opposition Members, with regard to some of their comments, that this Government have built more council houses in their time than in 13 years of the last Labour Government. But we know there is more to do and we are committed to doing it.

7. Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Homelessness is rising, and that is why we need action to stop it reaching the peak levels that we saw under the last Labour Government. What progress is being made to stop it reaching the peak levels that we saw under the last Labour Government.

8. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Of the 600 homeless people who died last year, 85% were men, one third died of drug overdoses and 10% died from rough sleeping.
alcohol poisoning. Will the Secretary of State ensure that those groups and factors are specifically prioritised in order to tackle this issue?

James Brokenshire: I am pleased to say that our rough sleeping strategy is intended to give that prioritisation, through work not only by my Department but across Whitehall. My hon. Friend is right about that need, and that is what we are determined to provide through the strategy.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Centrepoint estimates that local funding for Bath and North East Somerset Council would need to double to deliver on new duties for homeless young people under the Homelessness Reduction Act. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether he will bring forward proposals to ensure that post 2020 Homelessness Reduction Act funding is based on the level of local demand for homelessness support?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated, we will conduct a review of the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act and look at evidence about local authorities' pressures and needs. I want to ensure that the Act is implemented well and that we are preventing people from becoming homeless.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): To deal with homelessness, we need to deal with the housing shortage. Will my right hon. Friend join me in applauding the work of North West Leicestershire District Council, which has overseen the construction of more than 1,000 new homes in the last 12 months, including the first council houses to be built for more than 30 years? Does he think it is a coincidence that we again recorded no rough sleepers in the district over the last 12 months?

James Brokenshire: I commend my hon. Friend and his council for the work they are doing to build the homes that our country needs. Of course it is about the supply of affordable and social housing, which is why we are taking steps across the board to get people building.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Last year, nearly 600 people died homeless in this country. The Secretary of State was right to admit, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), that this is truly shocking. In a country as decent and well off as ours, this shames us all. We cannot stop homeless people dying if we do not grasp the reasons why it is getting worse, so why does the Secretary of State think that the number has risen in the last five years?

James Brokenshire: I share the right hon. Gentleman's understandable and rightful concern about the number who were shown to have died and the increase in rough sleeping. I have certainly not hidden from that or from the challenges and responsibilities that we have as a Government to look at the complex issues that lie behind this. We also need to look at what we can do in terms of other issues, such as social policy, where changes have been made, and to look at the evidence, to ensure that we are making a difference and eradicating rough sleeping, preventing people from becoming homeless and ensuring that the most vulnerable are well supported.
Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is incredibly important that the UK Government do not confine their engagement in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to the devolved Administrations. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that, in developing the UK shared prosperity fund, they will engage fully with businesses and third sector organisations in those three nations?

James Brokenshire: We are intending to move forward with the consultation on the UK shared prosperity fund, which will allow everyone to be able to participate—obviously with the devolved Administrations, but with other stakeholders too, as I have indicated—to ensure that this fund is well structured, delivers on the new arrangements for our priorities as the UK as we leave the EU and ensures that those funds are well used.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Has the Secretary of State taken cognisance of the recommendation of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that the UK Government should at the very least match the £2.4 billion a year that communities across these islands currently receive as a result of EU structural funds?

James Brokenshire: We will look very carefully at the representations we receive. Obviously, the UK shared prosperity fund is designed to tackle inequalities between communities by raising productivity following our departure from the European Union, harnessing those opportunities and making sure that we have a new fund—according to our own priorities—that is easier to administer and therefore better able to deliver.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. For the period 2014 to 2020, Scotland received €476 million from the European regional development fund and €465 million from the European social fund. We are losing this because Scotland is being dragged out of the EU against our will. Will he commit today to matching this at the very least, and will he devolve the shared prosperity fund in full to the Scottish Government?

James Brokenshire: Obviously, we will consult widely on the UK shared prosperity fund. We still have the spending review to be conducted later this year, but we are determined that, as we leave the European Union, we will have these new funding arrangements in place to deliver for all of our United Kingdom, to raise the sense of opportunity and prosperity, and to make a success.

Housing Ladder: Young People

3. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help young people get on the housing ladder. [908831]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Since 2010, over 500,000 people have been helped into home ownership through Government-backed schemes, including Help to Buy and right to buy. Our recent evaluation of the Help to Buy equity loan scheme found that 58% of people using the scheme were under 35 years old.

Robert Courts: As well as challenges, the Oxfordshire Cotswolds garden village provides a real opportunity for us to have the affordable starter homes that for so long have been lacking in places such as West Oxfordshire. What are Ministers doing to provide district councils such as mine with support to provide the housing mix that our area needs?

James Brokenshire: I warmly welcome the plans for the homes in the Oxfordshire Cotswolds garden village. My hon. Friend asks about supporting local authorities, and I would say to him that we have abolished the housing revenue account borrowing cap. That, alongside the £9 billion affordable homes programme and the revised national planning policy framework, empowers local authorities to deliver the right mix of homes for their area.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): When young people find themselves homeless, they are often sofa surfing and living in risky accommodation because of the lack of council homes. Living in a rented room is more affordable than renting a private flat. Will the Secretary of State say what steps the Government are therefore taking to protect vulnerable young people seeking housing accommodation in houses in multiple occupation?

James Brokenshire: As the hon. Lady will know, we have raised standards on fitness for human habitation in legislation that was supported across the board, and improved the support to ensure that we have a stronger, more positive private rental sector market. Conversations are continuing, and I recognise the point that she makes about raising standards and ensuring that the sense of opportunity is firmly in place.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): For many young people, the biggest obstacle to getting into the housing market is the value of the land. What discussions will the Secretary of State have with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about grading agricultural land to see if we can utilise some of the less good land for house building? [Interruption.]

James Brokenshire: Yes, firmly in Cornwall. The national planning policy framework is about empowering some of those local decisions and choices, in Cornwall and elsewhere. I am continuing to discuss how we can have that additionality—that positive benefit that we can unlock from our national environment through our planning work—with colleagues at DEFRA and others across Government.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Government’s Help to Buy scheme has undoubtedly helped many families on to the housing ladder, but it has also driven many other families off it by pushing up the market price. How do the Government respond to research that suggests that the net impact is at best neutral and probably negative?

James Brokenshire: No, through our schemes more than half a million households have been helped into home ownership through Help to Buy and right to buy. The number of first-time buyers rose 82% between 2010 and 2017, and we have seen the first sustained rise in
home ownership among 25 to 34-year-olds in 30 years. That is a positive step forward, although we know there is more to do. It is through initiatives such as Help to Buy that we are making that difference.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) knows all about houses as a whizz kid estate agent. Let us hear from the fellow.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): If you are ever thinking of moving, Mr Speaker, do let me know.

Councils across North Yorkshire, such as Richmondshire and Hambleton, are delivering more affordable housing to purchase through the category of discount market sale. What plans does the Secretary of State have to roll this policy out nationally?

James Brokenshire: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the veritable skills he clearly has in so many different areas, and on championing this particular course of action. It is right to recognise that we have delivered more affordable homes in the last eight years than there were in the last eight years of the last Labour Government. It is the sort of schemes that he identifies that are helping to make that difference, and we are examining carefully how such initiatives can be rolled forward.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The average mortgage for today’s 27-year-old on the Government’s living wage is more than half of their pay packet, but the Government are still allowing “affordable” to be defined as up to £450,000. Why do the Government not take a leaf out of Labour’s book and support our first-buy homes for which mortgages are no more than a third of average income?

James Brokenshire: I will take no lectures from the Labour party, given that when it was in government it saw house building fall to levels not seen since the 1920s. We are taking various steps to see more homes built and to ensure that people can get on the ladder to fulfil their dreams. That is something that we as a Government are committed to doing.

Local Authority Funding

4. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure an equitable distribution of funding to local authorities. [908832]

15. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure an equitable distribution of funding to local authorities. [908843]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): We are undertaking a review of local authorities’ relative needs and resources to develop a new, more transparent funding formula that will be fit for the future. We are making good progress in collaboration with the sector and recently launched a consultation that will close on 21 February.

Henry Smith: This financial year the Government have granted Crawley Borough Council more than £700,000 for homelessness reduction, and this coming financial year it will be more than £800,000. However, the leadership of the council are complaining about a lack of capital funding for a homeless shelter when it has reserves of more than £21 million. Can I have an assurance from the Department that local authorities will be asked to properly deploy their resources to help the most vulnerable?

Rishi Sunak: The people of Crawley are lucky to be represented by someone who had a very successful career in local government. My hon. Friend is excellently well placed to know that any council should look at using its excess reserves first, rather than refusing to invest in local services or unduly increasing the burden on hard-working taxpayers.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) has just been on the receiving end of a charm offensive, in case he had not noticed.

Damien Moore: Does the Minister agree that funding is often better distributed through town councils? Will he condemn Sefton Labour councillors who voted against Southport having its own town council?

Rishi Sunak: This Government support communities that wish to take greater ownership of local decision making. I encourage my hon. Friend and Southport residents to formally petition the council to undertake a community governance review. That will ensure they have the opportunity for their views to be properly considered.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Getting back to helping the most vulnerable, in the consultation document, the Secretary of State proposed to remove deprivation completely as a means of allocating resources from the foundation element of the formula, the non-care element, and rely totally on per capita allocation. Does the Minister not accept that people in the most deprived communities are more likely to use public transport, more likely to need the help of a housing officer and more likely to use council leisure facilities because they cannot afford those in the private sector? If he will not reinstate deprivation as part of the formula, does he accept that the whole review will become known as the very unfair funding review?

Rishi Sunak: This is a consultation, and I would be happy to receive informed opinion from the hon. Gentleman, the Chair of the Select Committee. I would point out, however, that the funding formula covers broadly universal services used by the majority, if not all, of a council’s residents. As we disclosed transparently in the consultation document, population is by far and away the most important factor driving the need for those services. Deprivation was shown to account for less than 4% of the variation in spend in the area.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): South Cambridgeshire District Council, deprivation rank 316, has seen a spending power cut of just £21.85 per household this year compared to 2010. Knowsley Council, deprivation rank two, has seen a spending power cut of £1,057 per household, while Hackney, deprivation rank 11, has seen the largest cuts in spending power of £1,406 per household. How is that fair?
Rishi Sunak: I have some figures, too. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to take account of the fact that the spending power per household of the most deprived authorities is today 23% higher than those that are the least deprived.

Andrew Gwynne: There are lies, damned lies and statistics. The Minister cannot get away from the fact that poorer areas are poorer on his watch and that health inequalities are widening on his watch. The situation is set to get worse as he seeks to continue with his reverse redistribution, shifting funds from the poorest communities to some of the wealthiest. Will he now agree, in the interests of transparency, to Labour’s call for the National Audit Office to independently scrutinise the fairness of his so-called fair funding review before it is implemented?

Rishi Sunak: I do not think that I heard a rebuttal of the statistics I outlined. It is clear that the Government are supporting people in every part of the country. We are providing £1 billion of extra funding to deliver social services and a real-terms increase in funding for local government in the next coming year.

Leaseholders: Removal of Dangerous Materials

5. Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): What progress has he made in discussions with developers and freeholders on ensuring that leaseholders are not liable for the removal and replacement of dangerous building materials.

Dr Offord: Although that is indeed admirable for those leaseholders, my constituents in Premier House in Edgware are still being told by the freeholder of their building that they must pay for the removal of the dangerous cladding. That has resulted in thousands of pounds of costs for legal fees and safety measures, and it has rendered their properties unsaleable. Will the Minister assure me that the Government have a plan B for leaseholders who are held liable for costs? Will she advise me when my constituents can reasonably expect their situation to be resolved?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend will have to excuse me for speaking with my back to him.

My hon. Friend works tirelessly to support the residents of Premier House in Edgware on the removal of cladding. I understand that that case will be brought before a tribunal at the beginning of April. The Government have made it clear that we expect building owners in the private sector to protect leaseholders from remediation costs. A growing list of companies, including Barratt Developments, Mace Group and Legal & General, are doing the right thing and are taking responsibility, and I can announce that Aberdeen Asset Management and Fraser Property have also joined that list. I urge all other owners and developers to follow the lead of those companies. I will consider all other options if they do not do so.

Mr Speaker: The growing phenomenon of Ministers reading out great screeds that have been written is very undesirable. A pithy encapsulation of the argument is what the House wants to hear.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Last week, the Minister told me that the Department is keeping pressure on Ballymore Ltd, following the Secretary of State’s letter of 19 December, for which I am grateful. However, the leaseholders have now received an offer from Ballymore saying that the bill is £2.4 million for fire safety work. They can have half a million pounds off, but they must pay the rest. That offer is only open until 31 March. What more can the Department do to help my constituents? Time is clearly running out.

Mrs Wheeler: I am not reading from any notes, Mr Speaker.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very useful information. If we can see the letter, we will take the matter forward.

Mr Speaker: Excellent.

20. [908849] Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Housing Minister, in response to a debate on Wednesday 22 January, indicated that he had written to the owners and the developer of Northpoint in Bromley. It is exactly the same situation as that outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). Has the Minister yet had a response, and what assurance can be given to Bromley Council about the guidance should it use emergency remedial powers under the Housing Act 2004?

Mrs Wheeler: It is a pleasure to be able to face my hon. Friend; I apologise to hon. Members behind me. The Secretary of State has written, and we are awaiting the outcome to that. As soon as we get a reply, we will be in touch directly with my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim McMahon.

Mr Speaker: I call Neil Coyle.

Local Authorities: Vulnerable Children

6. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the ability of local authorities to discharge their statutory responsibilities to vulnerable children.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Local authorities have been given access to more than £46 billion for the forthcoming year. That funding is largely unfenced, so councils can spend it on children’s services.
as they see fit. I am pleased that the number of local authorities whose children's services are ranked good or outstanding is continuing to increase.

**Neil Coyle:** More than 50,000 British-born children with parents legally in the UK are denied access to central Government support under pernicious Home Office rules. Councils are then forced to step in to provide emergency support through children's social services. London councils spend £53 million on that, and there is no recourse to public funds. Last year, my council spent £6.5 million. When will Ministers end their wilful blindness to the penury that the policy causes and stand up for councils in the face of this blatant Home Office cost-shunt?

**Rishi Sunak:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We engage with the Home Office regularly to deal with the funds for unaccompanied asylum seekers and other such people. I am happy to realise that issue in the next of my regular meetings with the Immigration Minister.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Permitted development rights have been a disaster for my consistency of Harlow, as London councils have socially cleansed their residents and sent 400 troubled families to our constituency. We do not have the resources to look after them in the way they should be. Will my hon. Friend look at permitted development rights, undertake a review and ensure Harlow Council has the resources it needs to look after those 400 extra troubled families?

**Rishi Sunak:** I will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that issue. Of course, vulnerable children must be housed appropriately and looked after, but we should ensure that that is done as closely as possible to where it makes sense for their communities.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Jim McMahon.

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was frantically trying to think of a question when you called me just now. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

The number of children in need is up, the number of looked-after children is up and the numbers of child protection plans and child conferences are up, yet the Government grant has gone down. This year, children’s services face a £1 billion funding gap—£3 billion by 2024-25—and the Local Government Association, the Children’s Commissioner, Action for Children and other such people warn that children will be at risk. So where’s the money?

**Rishi Sunak:** The hon. Gentleman should know that last year £1 billion more was spent on children’s services than when we came into office and that the recent Budget announced an extra £420 million that could be spent on children’s services. Government Members are, however, concerned with outcomes, not just the amount of money we plough into things, which is why the Department for Education is working closely with the best-performing areas to spread best practice across the country.

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**Potholes**

**7. Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on funding for local authorities to reduce the number of potholes.  

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government** (Jake Berry): Ongoing discussions before the autumn Budget led to the Government announcing £420 million of additional funding for highways authorities to fill potholes and carry out other works. The Conservatives: the party of filling the many potholes, not the few.

**Mr Hepburn:** The national problem of potholes has been caused by this Government and their 50% cut to local government funding for tackling it. While the new money is welcome, it is a drop in the ocean. North-east councils alone need £1 billion to sort out their pothole problem. Will the Minister press the Chancellor for more?

**Jake Berry:** Cycling UK estimates that it costs an average of £53 to fill a pothole, so the money announced at the last Budget in the north-east alone is enough to fill over 400,000 potholes. Rather than complaining about it, perhaps it is time those north-east councils got on with it.

**Mr Speaker:** I want to hear about the pothole situation in Huddersfield. I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Potholes are not a joke for cyclists; many are killed on our roads every year. The roads in Britain are becoming more dangerous, and our very good record in road safety is being lost to other countries. Is it not about time the Minister talked to the Home Secretary and others not only about potholes but about the number of police on our roads catching people who break the law?

**Jake Berry:** I am about to pick up my new bicycle tomorrow, so the issue of potholes is close to my heart. The Government are working cross-departmentally to tackle the problem, which is why we have created this £420 million fund—to fill potholes up and down the England.

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**New Homes for Social Rent**

**9. Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of new homes for social rent since 2010.

**The Minister for Housing** (Kit Malthouse): We constantly review the construction levels of all types of new homes.

**Liz Twist:** The Government’s pledge to replace homes sold under the council right to buy scheme has been a failure, with only one home being built for every four sold. Why should anyone believe that things will be different when it is extended to housing association tenants? Is it not time to suspend right to buy?

**Kit Malthouse:** There are plenty of signs that the Labour party is detaching itself from its historic supporter base, but one of the saddest is its inability to grasp the aspiration of working families to own their own home. The concerted attack on one of the most popular policies of the past 30 years—the right to buy—is a very
sad spectacle. I am perfectly willing to acknowledge that the one-for-one replacement policy has not been sufficient to provide the number of social homes the country needs, and we are reviewing that policy at the same time as taking the cap off the housing revenue account and allowing councils, which frankly were induced out of council house building by the Labour Government, to get on and build the new generation of social homes.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Our excellent Housing Minister will know that parishes and towns with neighbourhood plans in place will have 15% more houses built as a result. He may also be aware that they are quite cumbersome to put in place. Does he have plans to make them easier to deliver, and will he hear representations from my parishes of Ticehurst, Robertsbridge and Salehurst about how they can be delivered a lot faster?

Kit Malthouse: I was wondering who my hon. Friend was referring to then—I thank him for that compliment. As somebody who represents a beautiful part of the country, he has long been a champion of local people ceasing to be victims of the planning system and taking control of it themselves, and he is quite right that neighbourhood plans are the way to do that. From my own experience in my constituency, I have been concerned

that they take some time and effort to put in place. We are reviewing what we can do to smooth their passage, and we have some funding available to assist in that, but I would be more than happy to meet him and take representations from him and his constituents.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): City of York Council has presided over a net loss of social housing, and, according to a report published today by Centre for Cities, its level of house building has been one of the worst in the country. We have a serious housing crisis. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that our Tory and Liberal Democrat-controlled council builds the housing that is so desperately needed in our city?

Kit Malthouse: As I hope the hon. Lady knows, we have set aside significant resources to help councils achieve their housing aspirations. We will be helping with infrastructure and providing other assistance to help them over the line. Critical to that, however, is ensuring that they have a local plan. I am sure that the coalition that is in control of City of York Council would welcome the hon. Lady’s participation in their creation of such a plan, rather than her antagonism towards it.

Park Home Residents

10. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle the exploitation of park home residents. [908838]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): The Government are committed to ensuring that park home residents are better protected. We have set out a range of measures to review the park home legislation and tackle the abuse and financial exploitation of residents. New legislation will be introduced when parliamentary time allows.

Helen Whately: Residents of leisure park homes in my constituency appear to have been mis-sold their properties by rogue site owners, and they are now vulnerable to exploitative charges and intimidation. Will my hon. Friend consider extending the provisions of the Mobile Homes Act 2013 to give leisure home owners more rights and protections, and will she take a broader look at the mis-selling and misuse of leisure homes?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend has been a thorough champion on behalf of residents of leisure park homes. The situation is iniquitous. The Mobile Homes Act applies to residents of sites with residential planning permission, but leisure home owners are protected under consumer rights legislation. My Department is working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which is responsible for consumer issues, to better communicate those protections to leisure home owners. I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend shortly to discuss the matter again.

New House Building

11. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time taken to build new homes. [908839]

19. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time taken to build new homes. [908847]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): As many Members will know, my mantra is “More, better, faster”, and we are very keen to accelerate the delivery of housing. Across England, house building is at its highest level in all but one of the last 31 years. We are going further by streamlining the planning system, creating more certainty for developers and local communities and looking at the recommendations of the build-out review conducted by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin).

Daniel Kawczynski: There have been some real delays in the Shropshire planning authority. What is the Minister doing to give Shropshire Council more resources so that it can attract more and better-qualified staff to streamline the planning process? This is starting to be a real problem.

Kit Malthouse: I applaud my hon. Friend’s impatience to build more new homes in his constituency. He recognises that the next generation of Salopians would welcome the provision of those homes as soon as possible. We have already given local authorities a 20% uplift in planning fees, and we have consulted on further resources in the past, but I have given a public commitment that if it becomes clear that resources in planning departments are a constraint, we shall be more than happy to talk to our Treasury colleagues about what more can be done.

Chris Davies: I commend the Secretary of State for publishing last year’s updated national policy planning framework, but may I encourage my hon. Friend to consider new ways to speed up the planning process?
Kit Malthouse: It is always a pleasure to be greeted by impatient Members who, as I say, want more housing for the next generation. My hon. Friend is right: we need to constantly examine the effects of the planning system on the production of new homes. As he says, we issued a new planning framework back in July. We are carefully assessing the impact of those policies, but if my hon. Friend has useful and constructive suggestions, I shall be more than happy to hear them.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Government’s expansion of permitted development rights has caused multiple problems across the country. Such developments make no section 106 contributions towards new social housing. There are reports of homes of appalling quality, with children forced to play in car parks on industrial estates, and of homes in some areas being used only for short-term holiday lets, while developments in other areas are causing the loss of valuable employment space. Last week, the permanent secretary confirmed to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that the Government had undertaken no evaluation of this policy. Will the Secretary of State call time on the policy, so that a full evaluation of the impacts can be undertaken?

Mr Speaker: Order. There seems to be a competition between what I would call parliamentary essayists today. That was an extremely eloquent essay—very erudite—but we could do with a paragraph.

Kit Malthouse: We will not call time on a policy that has produced tens of thousands of homes for people who need them. We are aware that there have been some difficulties with properties converted under permitted development rights, but we are not entirely sure that local authorities are using the tools at their disposal to make sure that standards are maintained. However, as I said earlier, we keep all our policies under constant review and I would be more than happy to look at specific situations if the hon. Lady wishes to raise them.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol was one of the sites for the first ever council houses built under the Addison Act 100 years ago—in Hillfields in my constituency. We are now building council homes again, but nobody from the Department has been prepared to come for our centenary celebrations this year—you have turned down the invites. May I ask why?

Kit Malthouse: The main reason is that I am impatient to visit and the hon. Lady will be pleased to know that if all goes to plan I will be there on Thursday.

Mr Speaker: Well, there is time for a keen sense of eager anticipation to build up before the hon. Gentleman arrives.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my hon. Friend pay tribute to the work of Homes England in its support for Mid Sussex District Council in providing the key that will open the development of 4,000 new houses in Burgess Hill? Will he see what further work Homes England, in its very constructive approach, can adopt to deliver more new housing?

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend is to be admired in displaying yet more impatience for homes to be built, and he is right that the newly revamped Homes England is an impressive and entrepreneurial organisation which is using its skills to unlock sites across the country. In the six months that I have been in this job, I have been impressed by its work and I am now busy touring sites, as I was in Poole in Dorset, where it is applying its skills and industry to unlock precisely the kind of problem that he talked about.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): There is a three-year period for a one-to-one replacement to start at a site, but what is the average time for completion of one-to-one replacements? Of the one-to-one replacements that the Government say are in progress, how many are actually occupied?

Kit Malthouse: I am afraid I am going to fail the hon. Gentleman: I do not have that precise number at my fingertips at the moment. But I am more than happy to write to him about it. He will know, however, that we have consulted on changes to the one-to-one replacement policy and we will be coming forward with a response, and hopefully improvements, soon.

Private Parking Sector

12. Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle unfair practices in the private parking sector.

21. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle unfair practices in the private parking sector.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The Government fully support the Parking (Code of Practice) Bill of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight). It will create an independent code of practice for private parking companies and deliver robust accountability, providing a much better deal for motorists.

Giles Watling: I was pleased to support and sit on the Committee for the Parking (Code of Practice) Bill, which my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire so expertly steered through Parliament, but parking scams have been operating in Clacton for many years and it is literally driving my constituents around the bend; they want a solution. When this Bill completes its journey and receives Royal Assent, how quickly can it be implemented?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the Committee and for highlighting his constituents’ problems. I am pleased to tell him that I have already placed a draft outline of the code in the House of Commons Library and as soon as Royal Assent is achieved a full code will be issued for formal statutory consultation.

Mike Wood: What assessment has the Minister made of the Bill of our right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire and its likely impact, and does he believe that more is needed to help to protect our constituents from cowboy parking enforcers?
Rishi Sunak: The current system is one of self-regulation and, sadly, the behaviour of some rogue operators using questionable or intimidating practices means that change is required and we must act. The new code will mean consistency and higher standards for parkers and will ensure that rogue operators are driven out of business.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My constituents—particularly disabled constituents and those, for example, attending hospital appointments—also suffer from punitive cowboy parking operators. What efforts can be made in the code to give special protection to them?

Rishi Sunak: These are exactly the kinds of things that the code of practice will cover, and I will be delighted to receive representations from the hon. Lady as the code is developed.

Local Government Funding: Low-income Families

13. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on low-income families of changes in local government funding. [908841]

Rishi Sunak: Beyond that, it promotes cultural change to ensure that all local areas have a stake in the economic future of their community.

18. [908846] Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): This month, the Scottish Government announced £4 million to provide free sanitary products in council buildings such as libraries and leisure centres. Such measures can make all the difference to low-income families’ monthly budgets. Will the Minister commit to look at what Scotland is doing and to follow their forward-thinking approach?

Rishi Sunak: I welcome the cross-Government work on this issue. As the House knows, a couple of years ago the Government announced the £15 million annual tampon tax fund to support women’s charities. There are no current plans to provide extra money to local authorities, but of course the Government keep that under review.

Business Rates Relief Scheme

14. Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): What steps he is taking under the 2019-20 business rates relief scheme to encourage a diversity of businesses on the high street. [908842]

Rishi Sunak: I welcome the cross-Government work on this issue. As the House knows, a couple of years ago the Government announced the £15 million annual business rates relief fund. That included a business rate discount of some £900 million for eligible retailers and a £675 million future high street fund.

Clive Efford: I am grateful to the Minister for the answer. I recently visited a new start-up in my high street that runs escape rooms and panic rooms—I commend them to the Prime Minister. They do not qualify for the retail discount as they are deemed a leisure business. Is it possible that small business rate relief can be extended to such innovators on our high streets to ease the pressure as they start up their businesses?

Jake Berry: The point is that big or small, all rate reliefs benefit the entire high street. Healthy high streets are busy high streets, and businesses of whatever type benefit from people visiting them.

Rough Sleepers: Cold Weather Accommodation

17. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of emergency cold weather accommodation for rough sleepers. [908845]

Rishi Sunak: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the current system is one of self-regulation and, sadly, the behaviour of some rogue operators using questionable or intimidating practices means that change is required and we must act. The new code will mean consistency and higher standards for parkers and will ensure that rogue operators are driven out of business.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Having campaigned for it, I am delighted that the Secretary of State has approved a new business rates retention pilot from Northamptonshire that is anticipated to lever in an additional £17 million for local services. What difference does he believe this will make for frontline services in the county?

Rishi Sunak: I am delighted that Northamptonshire will benefit from the new business rate pilot. Of course, that money can be used by the councils, working together to invest in the future prosperity of their communities.
Nic Dakin: I thank the Minister for that answer. New Life Church, together with North Lincolnshire Council, is providing temporary support for people in really bad weather. Good work is also being done locally with the Forge project. What will the Government do to ensure that such projects continue into the future to help homeless people?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that excellent supplementary question. The straightforward answer is that I would urge all councils that have not applied before to apply to this new fund and we will see what we can do for north-east Lincolnshire.

Topical Questions

T1. [908855] Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Local councils will play an important role in supporting communities as we leave the EU, and I am committed to working with them to ensure that they are prepared to respond to any Brexit scenarios. I can therefore confirm that local authorities will receive an extra £56.5 million to help them with their Brexit preparations and to help deliver essential services and keep residents well informed. We also remain in close contact with local councils through our rough sleeping initiative to support some of the most vulnerable in our society and help them to get the support they need.

Yesterday, Members across the House remembered Holocaust Memorial Day. I had the privilege to attend the incredibly moving national commemoration of those who lost their lives in the holocaust and subsequent genocides. Those dark events of the past call on us all to confront racism, bigotry and hatred wherever it may occur and to stand up for tolerance, reconciliation and stronger communities.

Lyn Brown: Councils in deprived areas such as mine are desperately scrambling to find the funds to meet their needs while facing almost double the spending cuts of the least-deprived area. The Minister says that this is about population, but London is home to 16% of the population and has suffered 30% of the cuts. This Government still favour wealthy areas over poor ones. Is that because they are mostly Tory areas?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady should look at the settlement that we have provided, which involves an extra £1 billion for local government across the board. Indeed, it represents a real-terms increase that is intended to make a real difference to how we support councils to meet pressures and challenges.

T2. [908856] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Proposals to convert empty high street shops into housing have raised concerns in rural areas such as West Oxfordshire that there may be a perverse incentive to close viable shops in order to realise the greater value of housing. Will Ministers agree to meet me and my district council to ensure that the policy is tailored for both rural and metropolitan areas?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Embedding residential communities on our high streets is part of the future health of the high street, and I will with pleasure meet my hon. Friend and representatives from his constituency to take the discussions forward.

T3. [908857] Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Last week’s National Audit Office report confirmed that councils have responded to dwindling spending power by reducing spending on non-statutory children’s services. Despite evidence showing that preventive services work, they now account for just 25% of spending. Will the Minister assure the House that the upcoming spending review will explicitly address the lack of resources allocated to early intervention services?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I share the hon. Gentleman’s passion for ensuring that councils have adequate early intervention services. I have been championing the troubled families programme since I arrived in this job, and I would be delighted to hear from him and others about how best to ensure that a successor programme is available to councils.

T4. [908858] Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the Minister for meeting me and local Changing Places campaigner Lorna Fillingham, and I welcomed his announcement before Christmas that changing places will be mandatory in new public builds. Will he update the House on how the scheme is getting on?

Rishi Sunak: It was a pleasure to meet the hon. Gentleman and his constituent, who made a powerful and compelling case for Government action. I am pleased to tell him and all campaigners that we will outline the consultation before the Easter recess to take this important measure forward, and I look forward to his contribution.

T5. [908859] Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): A successor programme is available to councils.

T6. [908860] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): In many of my local towns and villages, the last bank and the last cashpoint have long gone, and the post office now provides essential services for my communities. Despite the Government investing £370 million in local post offices since 2017, post offices in East Dean, Alfriston and Newick are temporarily closed. What more can the Government do to support local community post offices across my constituency?

Jake Berry: We absolutely support the role of rural post offices, particularly as a hub at the heart of our communities. That is why the most recent Budget cut business rates for most small post offices, and through our support for “Pub is The Hub” we have helped post offices move into people’s locals. Pints and parcels, Mr Speaker.

T4. [908858] Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the Minister for meeting me and local Changing Places campaigner Lorna Fillingham, and I welcomed his announcement before Christmas that changing places will be mandatory in new public builds. Will he update the House on how the scheme is getting on?

Rishi Sunak: It was a pleasure to meet the hon. Gentleman and his constituent, who made a powerful and compelling case for Government action. I am pleased to tell him and all campaigners that we will outline the consultation before the Easter recess to take this important measure forward, and I look forward to his contribution.

T7. [908861] Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Coastal erosion is a growing issue in Cornwall due to our more extreme weather patterns, and there is particular concern about the risk to cliff-top developments. The Newquay neighbourhood plan seeks to limit cliff-top development through declaring the whole parish coastline a coastal change management area. Will the Minister join me in congratulating the neighbourhood plan team
on their proactive approach? What more can we do through the planning system to limit inappropriate cliff-top development?

**The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse):** My hon. Friend is continually effective in bringing the issues of his constituency to this House. He will know that I am unable to comment on a specific neighbourhood plan, but I confirm to him that planning policy is clear that planning done through neighbourhood plans should be safe and should take coastal change into account.

**T5. [908859] Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab):** The Liverpool city region is one of the poorest in the country, yet its councils have faced some of the biggest cuts. The Secretary of State knows that services cost more in more deprived areas. Is not the only conclusion to be drawn from this targeting of cuts at the poorest areas that this Government simply could not care less?

**Jake Berry:** How typical it is of the Labour party to measure success only by what is put in. We believe in the northern powerhouse, which is about creating a growing northern economy. We have created 200,000 jobs since 2010, we have created an historic mayoral devolution deal, including across Liverpool, and foreign direct investment in the north is growing at twice the national rate. Our approach has grown the northern economy by £22 billion in two years; the approach of the last Labour Government grew it by £4 billion in three years.

**Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con):** What steps is the Department taking to help to ensure fire safety in buildings, particularly those with a residential sleeping risk?

**James Brokenshire:** I note my hon. Friend’s experience of this, and we are working carefully across the board to implement the Hackitt review to ensure that building safety standards are raised. Indeed, we are currently consulting on approved document B. We are looking at continuing experience and, if there is experience from Scotland, we will certainly reflect on that, too.

**Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op):** Today’s Centre for Cities report is absolutely devastating, highlighting that cuts have fallen hardest on deprived communities in the north of England—including Liverpool—that are enduring the highest poverty rates. It is very disappointing to see the Minister grinning and laughing, because this is a very serious matter for the communities we represent. Does he agree with the conclusion of the Centre for Cities that the Treasury review of public spending, which is due for the autumn, must find extra funding for all councils if authorities are to remain sustainable?

**Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con):** Will the Housing Minister extend his motto to “More, better, faster, safer” by introducing a requirement for carbon monoxide detectors in all new homes that have gas-burning appliances?

**Kit Malthouse:** My hon. Friend is to be applauded for the constant pressure he keeps up on the Government on safety issues. He is right that we are looking at the introduction of carbon monoxide detectors. We have gathered evidence, which we are looking at, and we will be coming forward with a response shortly.

**Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab):** We had two debates in the Chamber last week on dangerous cladding, which shows the incompleteness of the Government’s response. Can we have a comprehensive strategy from the Government this year that deals with all types of building, all types of cladding and all types of landlord?

**James Brokenshire:** We provide regular updates that specify the work taking place through the remediation programme to deal with this very serious issue of combustible cladding. The hon. Gentleman will well know the work that is in place, both in the public sector and in the private sector, but I underline to him the urgency I attach to this and how I am not keeping anything out of consideration in making sure that people are safe and feel safe.

**Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab):** The Local Government Association chair, Lord Porter, recently said: “We are unanimous that deprivation should be in” the foundation formula. Why does the Secretary of State disagree with his Conservative colleague?

**James Brokenshire:** As the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) said, we are consulting on the fair funding review in setting out that new arrangement for local government. As he has already set out, that is a means of ensuring that spending is felt effectively and fairly across the country and there are different ways of doing that.

**Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con):** On council tax and rent to be paid during the migration period of universal credit, will the Minister confirm that local authorities will be asked to take into account these exceptional circumstances and provide leeway when tenants fall behind on payments?

**James Brokenshire:** We are working closely with colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions on the implementation of universal credit, issues relating to housing and the connection that local government...
has on the frontline in the delivery of these issues. We are therefore ensuring that this will be done effectively, as my hon. Friend appropriately says.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): Today, it has been revealed that Barnsley is the local authority hardest hit by Government funding cuts. Can the Minister really justify targeting cuts on the poorest in society?

**Rishi Sunak:** This Government are committed to ensuring that every resident in this country gets the funding they need to have the services they deserve. The upcoming fair funding review is based on transparent, simple analytics and I am happy to hear from any colleagues if they disagree with the numbers.

**Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): Residents across my constituency and beyond are extremely concerned about the Rivenhall incinerator development, which was originally approved by the last Labour Government. With revised planning applications being considered, will the Secretary of State listen to my constituents and act by calling this application in?

**James Brokenshire:** I note the way in which my right hon. Friend is championing her constituents in her customary powerful and passionate way. She will understand, on the issue of calling in, that this is quasi-judicial and I am therefore unable to comment. However, I note the way in which she has championed the cause.

**Mr Speaker:** The fact that the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) served with distinction as a headteacher and the fact that she has been waiting so patiently are, in my judgment, not unrelated.

**Thelma Walker** (Colne Valley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Can the Secretary of State tell me whether any assessment has been made of the number of homeless people who have a history of special educational needs that may not have been appropriately supported in the past?

**James Brokenshire:** I recognise the hon. Lady’s own experience in raising that issue, some of the background, some of the challenges and some of the issues that may have led to someone falling through the gap and ending up on the street. We are determined to get better data and better analysis, so that we can provide more targeted help. That is precisely what we are committed to doing through the rough sleeping strategy.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Residents of Goxhill in my constituency are mindful that the village needs to expand and that new homes are needed, but does the Minister agree that local authorities and planning inspectors need to be mindful of the fact that there must be a limit on new homes in villages?

**Kit Malthouse:** Goxhill is lucky to have such an assiduous representative in my hon. Friend. I agree with him that we need to balance the aspiration for new homes for the next generation against the need for sensitive and appropriate development. I urge him to work with the residents of Goxhill to put in place a neighbourhood plan, which would mean that they would no longer be victims of the planning system, but its bosses.

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that the battering of Birmingham next year will be all the more severe for his decision to rule out access to the council’s reserves. Birmingham’s MPs have written to him to ask for a meeting. When he finally wrote back, he refused to meet. May I say to him that he can take these decisions but it is incumbent on him to front them up to Members of this House?

**James Brokenshire:** I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I am happy to meet him and his colleagues because, obviously, I am focused on ensuring sustainability and stability in the finances in Birmingham. We took that decision carefully and in a considered way, but I recognise the points he makes and I am happy to meet him.
3.39 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Venezuela.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Last week, hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans took to the streets to protest against Nicolás Maduro’s continued presidency, after deeply flawed elections last May and his unmerited re-inauguration earlier this month. Those demonstrations were the latest of many that have taken place over the past two years, and represent what can be interpreted only as a cry for change in a country that has been rendered destitute by Maduro and his cronies. Venezuela is becoming a state that is run by cartels and criminal gangs. We know that it harbours groups such as the ELN—the National Liberation Army—that threaten to destabilise Colombia’s hard-won peace agreement, and increase the threat of terrorism and the proliferation of weapons and drugs. The bomb attack in Bogotá last week was perhaps a recent example of just that.

Last Wednesday, on 23 January, Juan Guaidó, the president of the Opposition-controlled and democratically elected National Assembly, condemned the illegitimacy of Maduro’s regime and declared himself, under the Venezuelan constitution, the interim President. Within 24 hours, regional countries from the Lima Group and the Organisation of American States, along with the United States and Canada, had declared their support, recognising Mr Guaidó as the interim President. The EU also issued a statement saying that the voice of the Venezuelan people could not be ignored, and called for new credible elections to take place.

On 24 January, the Foreign Secretary made it clear, in a statement made in Washington ahead of his meeting with US Vice-President Pence, that we no longer regard Maduro as the legitimate leader of Venezuela. On Saturday, I attended an emergency UN Security Council meeting in New York, where I said that we believe that Juan Guaidó is the right man to take Venezuela forward and that we will recognise him as constitutional interim President if new elections are not announced within eight days. This is a position shared by the French, German, Spanish and Dutch Governments. On 26 January, the EU also called for the urgent holding of free, transparent and credible presidential elections in accordance with international democratic standards and the Venezuelan constitutional order. We are in close consultation with our EU and international partners on this issue, and the Foreign Secretary will discuss Venezuela with EU Foreign Ministers later this week in Bucharest.

The UK and our partners cannot and will not stand by and allow the tyranny of Maduro’s regime to continue. He has caused endless suffering and oppression to millions of his own people. He has grossly mismanaged the economy for his own benefit, and his regime stands accused of serious crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court. Alongside others in the international community, we must urgently help to pave the way to a brighter future for the Venezuela that Maduro has so culpably ruined. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the United States and other allies in saying that the National Assembly and its president, Mr Juan Guaidó, are best placed to lead Venezuela to the restoration of its democracy, its economy and its freedom.

Mike Gapes: Venezuela should be one of the richest democratic countries in South America and the world. It has the largest proven oil reserves of any country, with 297 million barrels—more, even, than Saudi Arabia. It also has an educated population and large areas of arable land, yet today there is mass poverty and the economy has collapsed under the rule of the United Socialist party. The daughter of the late President Hugo Chávez, María Gabriela Chávez, is the country’s richest woman, with an estimated worth of $4.2 billion.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation says that there are 4.1 million people with malnutrition in Venezuela. The Catholic charity Caritas says that 41% of Venezuelans are now feeding on waste in markets. There is a shortage of medicines, including vital antibiotics for children, and blood banks are collapsing. Two thirds of buses in Caracas are out of action because there are no spare parts. An estimated 1 million people have sought refuge in neighbouring Colombia.

The economic collapse, as the Minister says, is a direct result of the corrupt, incompetent, kleptocratic regime of Nicolás Maduro. The Democratic Unity Roundtable coalition won the National Assembly elections in November 2015. It is a centre-left alliance, including two Socialist International member parties, the Popular Will and A New Era. It won 112 out of 167 seats, and that should have led to the end of 16 years of PSUV rule, but it did not. Maduro refused to co-operate and doubled down on his repression, and the country continued its economic collapse. The rigged presidential re-election has rightly been criticised by international observers. The decision by National Assembly president Juan Guaidó to be declared interim President is correct—it is a game-changer. So far, as has been said, that has been recognised internationally by many countries, and to that list, I add Australia and Israel, which have also done so recently.

The people of Venezuela do not need the weasel words of a letter to The Guardian, from assorted Stalinists, Trotskyists, antissemites and, apparently, dead people, and also from members of Labour’s Front Bench. What they need is our solidarity with the legitimate, elected, social democratic president of the National Assembly: interim President of Venezuela, Juan Guaidó. The European Union has called for credible elections, but Nicolás Maduro has already rejected that. What humanitarian assistance will we give to people in Colombia? What steps will we take within the UN? What further action can we take with the European Union? And when will our Government recognise Juan Guaidó as the President of Venezuela?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. These are most serious matters. I know that the hon. Gentleman will take it in good heart when I say that he is deeply versed in the history of Stalinism and Trotskyism, as many Members of the House can testify, because they have heard him expatiate on the subject, usually one to one, over many years, but
I notice that he did manage to include in his oration two or three questions right at the end. The normal form in an urgent question is to make a brief commentary followed by a series of inquiries. I have a sense that he was perhaps slightly more interested in what he had to say to the House than in what the Minister might have to say to him, but we shall see.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** May I profoundly thank the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) for enabling this urgent question to be discussed today in the House? I also thank him for his knowledge of, and passion and concern for, Venezuela, which we admire. They are, I can tell, widely shared across the House, except in some corners of it, which is, I think, to be deplored.

The hon. Gentleman is right that Venezuela should be pretty well the richest country in Latin America. It used to be, and it could be still. He painted an accurate picture of the human misery that has been caused by what he describes as the corrupt, incompetent and kleptocratic regime of Nicolás Maduro.

The National Assembly, which was elected, is legitimate, but as soon as it won and had a majority against Maduro, Maduro trumped it with the fake election of a Constituent Assembly, which he deemed, against the words of the Venezuelan constitution, to be more powerful than the National Assembly. The world knows that the National Assembly is legitimate, and the Constituent Assembly, and hence the subsequent flawed election of Nicolás Maduro, is not legitimate. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, we should all be saddened that, in our midst, there are people who still seem to have sympathy for the regime of Nicolás Maduro despite what it has done to poor people. It has made them not just poorer but destitute, and, in many cases, has forced them to flee. Let the signatories of that letter in *The Guardian* today be pinned on every wall as a list of signatures of shame.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I pay enormous tribute to my colleague on the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), whose voice of clarity in this House has been missing for some time on the question of Venezuela. I also pay tribute to the Minister, whose work at the United Nations in co-ordinating a joint response against tyranny has been so essential. Does he agree that those Members who side with the despots and thedictators against the democrats and the free people should be ashamed of themselves? This is appeasement. This is wrong: it is a crime and it cries out for justice. Thank God we have the Minister in his place, and no one else.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, he has been following the situation closely, as have all members of that Committee. I am pleased to say that I am not the only one who is doing what he says. The entire Government are, and I sense that our view is shared by many Opposition Members.

We have clear opinions about what the plight of the Venezuelan people is, but some say that our concern is based on a colonial mentality. It most certainly is not; it is based on genuine concern for the plight of millions who have had their faces driven into the dirt by Maduro. The steps that may have to be taken are based on law, and we are looking at the legitimacy of their Government, not just our view of the state of the people.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) for securing it.

Last Saturday, I condemned Venezuela as one of those countries where democracy has ceased to function in any meaningful way. Sadly, what we have seen over the past week has simply confirmed what I said then. The political, economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela is totally dire and will get ever worse as long as the Maduro Government continue to ignore human rights, free speech and the rule of law. What the Venezuelan people need instead is a Government who respect the rule of law, and uphold human rights and democracy—a Government who understand the scale of the crisis they face and who have a clear plan to resolve that crisis. Judging by their record in recent years, the Maduro Government fit none of those descriptions.

I also believe that it is a mistake in such situations simply to think that every problem will be automatically solved by changing the leader, let alone the kind of US-led intervention being threatened by Donald Trump and John Bolton. Instead, if we all genuinely believe in resolving the crisis in Venezuela and in restoring peace, democracy and stability, I hope that the Minister will agree that our chief priorities should be encouraging all parties to engage in dialogue, working towards a peaceful resolution and, ultimately, allowing the Venezuelan people themselves to decide the way forward through the holding of new free and fair elections.

The Minister will be aware that, across the Caribbean, there were similar violent protests this weekend against another repressive, authoritarian Government who abuse human rights and jail their opponents. But our Government do not criticise them; instead, they sell them arms and surveillance equipment. Only two months ago, they sent them what the Foreign Office boasted was “the most senior British trade mission in…years”.

Will the Minister tell us why this double standard exists and why the Government are not consistent in their condemnation of all Governments who abuse human rights?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** May I, at the very least, welcome the right hon. Lady’s condemnation of the Maduro regime? In that, at least, we find common ground, which I hope can be shared across the House. I am only sorry that it is not even shared across her own Front Benchers, as it is quite clear that the sympathies of the shadow Chancellor are at odds with the tone of her contribution to these proceedings.

This is not just about changing the leader, as the right hon. Lady put it; it is about applying the proper constitution of Venezuela, which is why the legitimate claimant to the presidency has been very careful to describe himself as the interim President, which is exactly what is stated in the constitution. On the back of that, like every right thinking person, is calling for prompt fair and free elections so that the people of Venezuela can properly elect the leader they want to govern them.
Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): The catastrophe that has befallen Venezuela under Maduro—cheered on, incidentally, by the Leader of the Opposition, his chief lieutenant and various other Poundland Lenins—has led to the ruin of a nation. Does the Minister agree that we must take the greatest care that such ruin never happens here?

Sir Alan Duncan: I certainly share the opinions of my right hon. Friend in all senses. The sympathies of the Leader of the Opposition with the likes of Maduro are very distressing. Clearly, in terms of his sentiment, he finds himself more in line with Cuba, China and Russia than he does with all democrats across the world.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) for bringing this urgent question to the House and the Minister for his statement.

We would like to reflect the calls of the Minister and of Federica Mogherini that democracy cannot and should not be ignored. There is a desperate need for free and fair elections. We condemn the violence and we condemn the regime carrying out the violence. That has also been condemned by Amnesty International, and we would do well to reflect on its remarks. Venezuela should be a wealthy country, yet so many people have been left in dire poverty.

Let me say to the Minister—I am glad that he reflected on this, as did the hon. Member for Ilford South—that we cannot ignore the humanitarian situation and the millions of refugees, with 1 million, as the Minister rightly said, in Colombia alone, which is going through its own peace process at the moment. How are we working with our European partners, in particular, and what is our long-term strategy in terms of free and fair elections and standing up to this regime? Will the Minister set out his response to the unfolding humanitarian crisis, as some humanitarian organisations are concerned that that has been lagging a little bit in the past?

Sir Alan Duncan: May I thank the hon. Gentleman for—for—if I may put it this way—the responsible nature of his questions and observations? I had a very extensive conversation on Friday evening with High Representative Federica Mogherini on exactly his question. We obviously want to see the maximum possible unity between the views of the Lima Group, the Organisation of American States, the United States and the EU. The EU, of course, has many citizens living in Venezuela and therefore has a direct interest in the plight of that country.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, those who have left Venezuela are in staggering numbers: well over 1 million have gone to Colombia; well over 1 million to Peru; nearly half a million each to Ecuador, Argentina and Chile; and 180,000 to Brazil. This is the biggest movement of population we have ever seen in Latin America, certainly of those caused by one person’s bad government rather than some kind of drought, famine or natural disaster. As I said, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will speak at length to EU colleagues in Bucharest on Thursday, when he will be at the Gymnich meeting, and we will do all we can to make sure that there is unity of approach should the eight days not be met with a promise of having elections from President Maduro.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Our thoughts must be with the people of Venezuela at this extremely difficult time, and they must also be with our embassy staff. Caracas is already a very dangerous capital. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that everything will be done to ensure their safety? Furthermore, will he look at reinstating the Foreign Office budget that allowed regional ambassadors to meet in the region at least twice a year so that they can come up with a better co-ordinated response? This budget was cut and I believe that that should be revisited.

Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend was a very distinguished Minister for the region when he was himself in the Foreign Office, and he knows an enormous amount about the subject. I can assure him and the House that I have been in regular contact with our excellent ambassador in Caracas, Andrew Soper. I am confident that, certainly at the moment, their wellbeing is fine and that they are not under threat. That must remain the case, of course. In terms of the budget, we are of course looking at where we will be when we leave the European Union, and Latin America is a very important focus for many of the bilateral and regional relationships that we want to develop and enhance.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I was appalled by the letter in The Guardian this morning, but more importantly, it was factually incorrect. America still buys 500,000 barrels of oil a day from Venezuela and props up the economy. It could withdraw from that, but has declined to do so because it would have an impact on the Venezuelan people.

I am concerned about the 4 million migrants, half of whom are children. I think that Members will be deeply concerned about their welfare, because they are destitute and struggling in the countries that the Minister has named. I have written to him many times since we came back from the summer recess about what the United Kingdom is doing. We are organising nothing; we are not involved in anything. Ministers come to the Dispatch Box with warm words, but it appears from the replies that he has given to me that our aid programme is no more than £10.2 million. When is the Government going to step up to the plate and look after these vulnerable people whom we should be looking after and caring for?

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his concern for those who have fled. We have to recognise the extraordinary generosity of the neighbours of Venezuela, who have had to take these people on. Our scope to do an enormous amount is limited, in that we have to work largely through multilateral organisations, as this is not an area in which the Department for International Development has had much historical involvement. We cannot just turn that on a sixpence, as I well know from my time in DFID, but the UK always steps up to the plate when it comes to helping people who are in trouble. Most of all, we should applaud countries such as Colombia that have welcomed well over 1 million refugees and ensured that they have been able safely to escape the perils of remaining in Venezuela.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Though frightful for Venezuelans, this does serve as a powerful object lesson, does it not?
Sir Alan Duncan: In many respects, indeed it does. One always has to be aware of my right hon. Friend’s very short and pithy questions. It is always better to just say, “Absolutely, yes; he is quite right.”

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) on securing the urgent question. Maduro is presiding over a corrupt regime after rigged elections and is inflicting misery on his own people. He has no legitimacy. While the shadow Foreign Secretary suggests that recognising the democratically elected president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, would be interventionist, does the Minister agree that these exceptional circumstances merit such an approach if no free and fair elections are forthcoming, not least because of the intensity of the human tragedy that is unfolding and the rigged elections that the presidency of Maduro is based on?

Sir Alan Duncan: I totally agree with the hon. Lady. What the Venezuelan people have had to suffer at the hands of Maduro is beyond contempt. Across the Floor of the House, we all believe that it is very important to champion human rights. I remind those who think that it is appropriate to support Venezuela at the moment on the one hand, and then on the other believe that they are also champions of human rights, that it is Venezuela’s neighbours who have referred not only the person but the entire state, for the first time ever, to the International Criminal Court, citing 8,000 extrajudicial executions, 12,000 arbitrary arrests and 13,000 political prisoners in custody. If people want to champion Venezuela, they are also championing that, and they should be ashamed of themselves.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I have been listening carefully to these exchanges because I visited Venezuela quite frequently until about 10 years ago. I remember it as a very attractive place with a rapidly emerging economy and a reasonably democratic constitution. Does my right hon. Friend share my slight trepidation and sense of powerlessness about exactly what the United Kingdom and our various allies are going to do? When he is consulting with the United States and the European Union, will he advise against just imposing more economic sanctions, which will cause even more poverty to the population of Venezuela, probably without moving the Maduro Government unduly? Will he consider targeted sanctions aimed at shifting the military elite, who are obviously solely responsible for keeping this dreadful Government in power? Will he consult not only the European Union and the United States, but friendly countries in the rest of Latin America? Governments such as that of Colombia will be the best guides to what might be done to change something in this completely failed and disgraceful regime.

Sir Alan Duncan: As usual, my right hon. and learned Friend offers the House some very wise advice and guidance, and I am able to say yes to pretty much everything he said. First, when it comes to sanctions, it is important to target individuals rather than cause increased pain to the citizens of Venezuela. On the other hand, most of the money that goes in gets stolen anyway and goes to the elite, so although one might think that sanctions would in normal circumstances often cause more damage to the country, they in fact do more broadly target the elite.

When it comes to talking to Venezuela’s neighbours, that is exactly what we in the Government and I personally have been doing for well over a year. The Lima Group, which is championed, as the name suggests, by the Foreign Minister of Peru, have been acting very closely together, and they are the ones that have been very tough on Venezuela—in some cases, removing ambassadors and calling for early elections and the removal of Maduro—and we are talking to them. It is from Venezuela’s regional neighbours that we perhaps take our most detailed steer and guidance in knowing how to approach this very difficult issue.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The Maduro regime has clearly been a disaster for the people of Venezuela, with the humanitarian catastrophe, as we have heard, and the appalling abuses of human rights documented by Amnesty International and others. I agree that pressing for fresh, free and fair elections must be our priority, but may I urge the Government to tread carefully in how we get there? Let us be honest, United States interference in Latin American countries has a pretty tragic and troubled history. Surely it is best for us to pursue the correct objective of seeking fresh elections via negotiation and mediation first.

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I think pressure is also needed to bring about those elections, which is why countries across the world are working very closely together. I think the unity of opinion among such a broad collection of different regions—America, including Canada; the EU; and the immediate neighbours—has the same view. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should be cautious, because the narrative of US interference in Latin America can stir up counterproductive voices. At the moment, what we want to do is solve the problem, rather than relive some of the difficulties of decades ago.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is only two weeks since the BBC 2 film “Revolution in Ruins”, on the legacy of Hugo Chavez, was broadcast, previewing what became worse with Maduro. Will my right hon. Friend invite the socialists who had the letter in The Guardian to come and see him to get them to explain whether they think things went wrong because of the personalities of Chavez and Maduro, or because of the policies and practices followed by those two Presidents?

Sir Alan Duncan: Tempted though I am by my hon. Friend’s suggestion that I should meet the signatories, it is a temptation I will choose to resist. Instead, I might send them the speech I gave in Chatham House last November about Venezuela so that they can learn a little bit more about history than they could perhaps impart to me.

Mr Speaker: Put it in the Library, if it is not there already. [Interruption.] Very good.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When I visited Venezuela in 2009, I was shown around a theoretically brand-new hospital, which was meant to be fully operational. Those showing me around must have thought I was a complete and utter idiot because every ward I went into had exactly the same patients—they were scurrying around from one ward to another. The truth is that the
Venezuelan Government have lied for years and years to their people and to the outside world, particularly Russia and China, and the people who are feeling the damage are the poor children on the streets and the parents who are unable to feed their children because there is nothing in the shops.

My biggest fear is what this may do to Colombia, however, because the peace process is very tender and Iván Duque’s election is not necessarily moving towards restabilising it. Could the Foreign Office in this country perform a very useful function in working with the Spanish Government to try to bring security and stability to Colombia, which is facing such an enormous influx from Venezuela?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. One of the reasons why the United Nations is interested is that this is not a domestic issue for Venezuela; it has regional and therefore international implications. One of those implications, as I said in my opening response, is that Venezuela is harbouring some of the elements who would undermine the peace process in Colombia. He is absolutely right, and he has a long-standing interest in and has supported the Colombian peace process. We need to understand that process fully and to realise that these matters are linked. Therefore, solving the problem in Venezuela can significantly help with the challenges, which are increasing, in Colombia.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is seven weeks since one of my hon. Friends wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the chairman of the Bank of England about the gold being held on behalf of the central bank of Venezuela. I followed that up with letters to the Governor, the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary. Is my right hon. Friend aware of the letter sent to a foreign Head of Government by interim President Guaidó was to the Prime Minister on 26 January about the gold being held on behalf of the central bank of Venezuela? The president of the central bank of Venezuela is unconstitutionally appointed, because he has not been approved by the national assembly. What are our Government going to do?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am aware of the letter, and, for the benefit of Members, if they do not know already, I confirm that the Bank of England holds a significant amount of Venezuela’s gold under a contract. The answer to my hon. Friend is that this is a decision for the Bank of England, not the Government. It has to make the decision on this, and no doubt when it does so it will take into account that many countries across the world are now questioning the legitimacy of Nicolás Maduro and recognising that of Juan Guaidó.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Why does this matter to the streets of Harlow? It is because 50% of cocaine shipments come through Venezuela. If there is a new regime there, will the Government work with it to stop cocaine reaching our shores and affecting the millions of people on hard drugs?

Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend is right. This has significance across the world because large amounts of drugs are trafficked through Venezuela. Of course, one cannot tackle that problem with the Government of Venezuela because they are party to that inappropriate drug trafficking themselves. Therefore, the solution for the streets of Harlow when it comes to Venezuela is to deal with a legitimate Government who are prepared to tackle the problem head-on in Venezuela.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): After a proper ballot and, hopefully, the election success of Juan Guaidó—whose party, incidentally, is a member of the Socialist International—Venezuela will still face an existential crisis, with the Maduro legacy of economic meltdown, a collapsing oil industry, hyperinflation, food shortages and 3 million citizens in exile. Should not the UK, the EU and the international community be preparing a Marshall plan for the reconstruction of Venezuela?

Sir Alan Duncan: One of the tragedies of Venezuela is that it has massive resources of its own. If only they were properly used, invested in and managed, no Marshall plan would be necessary in the way the right hon. Gentleman suggests. The country would be able to take advantage of having some of the greatest oil reserves in the world.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for North West Leicestershire is poised like a panther about to pounce. Let us hear the fellow.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): It is the only way to be noticed, Mr Speaker.

I welcome the urgent question. For too long, the House has stood by and watched Venezuela, which should be a prosperous country, slip into tyranny and destitution. Did my right hon. Friend hear the comments made on the radio by Ken Livingstone, the former Labour Mayor of London? He said that the reason for the problems in Venezuela was that the Marxist regime, when it seized power, did not execute enough people.

Mr Speaker: This is all very well, and I look forward to hearing the Minister of State, but it is fair to say that he has no responsibility for the pronouncements of Mr Livingstone, and is probably pleased not to have.

Sir Alan Duncan: It is always a pleasure not to even have to let the name pass my lips. However, it allows me to echo what I said earlier today—those who support the regime and make excuses for it, instead of focusing on the absolute degradation of human life that it has created, bring shame on themselves.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): The Venezuelan economy has been crippled by US sanctions. The first UN rapporteur to visit the country for 21 years is quoted as saying that US sanctions on the country are illegal and could amount to “crimes against humanity” under international law. Former special rapporteur Alfred De Zayas said that the US is waging “economic warfare” against Venezuela.

The issue is that there is a real danger. Venezuela is divided. There is no doubt about that. The truth is that millions support the Maduro Government and there is huge opposition to it. Intervention from the United States could precipitate a civil war and lead to a humanitarian catastrophe. Will the Minister explain why there are the double standards? Is it that he wants to facilitate another humanitarian catastrophe, as we are seeing in Yemen with British arms? Does he want to
see the same in Venezuela? Does he not support the self-determination of peoples around the world, rather than intervention from western powers?

Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) referred to “Poundland Lenins”. I have just seen in this House one who is not even worth a penny, let alone a pound. I recognise when I see it, as do Members on the Opposition Benches, unreconstructed ideological nonsense—he is a throwback and he brings shame; indeed, I am astonished he has even been prepared to show his face in this House today. If he wants self-determination I can offer it to him: it comes from legitimate elections in Venezuela when the Venezuelan people can determine who shall run their Government.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It takes a special kind of socialist incompetence to turn a country with the largest proven oil reserves in the world into one where 90% of the population live in poverty and 3.5 million citizens, 10%, have fled to neighbouring countries. The Minister has quite rightly insisted that there be full, fair and free elections in that country. What role will the United Kingdom play in ensuring that the elections are fair?

Sir Alan Duncan: When it comes to elections, we often offer very substantial advice and assistance to ensure that electoral registers are properly drawn up, and that the conduct of elections is properly monitored and financed. In this case, I hope it will be far more than just the UK taking an interest. I hope there will be a global effort to ensure that, together across the world, we can help to rescue the country from the tyranny it has been facing from Maduro.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister not agree that the hundreds of thousands taking to the streets in Venezuela and the millions fleeing that country are not doing so because of some grand Trump-oil conspiracy, but because they are starving? They are starving and they are suffering because of Maduro’s corrupt communism. Would it not be better if those who have been hailing that discredited ideology took this opportunity to apologise and admit they were wrong?

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his good sense and for his sense of humanity in analysing what is going on in Venezuela. I noticed that, as he said what he said, he cast a glance at his hon. Friend the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson). It astonishes me that some of those who are so unreconstructed, who are nothing more than throwbacks to an old communist era, bleat about the poor and are then happy to support someone who has done nothing other than make poor people poorer.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend as shocked as I am that the average Venezuelan lost 10 kg of their bodyweight in 2018 as a result of this regime?

Sir Alan Duncan: As the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) said, there are very many in Venezuela who are absolutely starving. This could be the richest country in Latin America, yet it has been reduced to poverty and destitution by the regime. Many are starving and many of the Venezuelans who are not are those who have managed to escape the country and go to generous countries next door.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): May I start by putting on the record my disgust at the fact that Baroness Massey, my friend who sits in the other place, had her name wrongly attributed to the letter in The Guardian this morning? That is a disgrace, as indeed is the letter. Every right-thinking Member of this House should unite in condemning the Maduro regime and call for his removal. Once that has happened, we will need significant support for Venezuela to organise free and fair elections. I know the Minister addressed this point earlier, but will the UK take a lead in ensuring that all necessary global support is given to Venezuela? It will be one of the biggest challenges faced by a country coming out of a dictatorship for many, many years.

Sir Alan Duncan: The Government absolutely recognise that Baroness Massey’s reputation is intact. We fully acknowledge that her name was wrongly put on that letter, and we in no way associate her good reputation with the other signatories.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right that it will take a lot of international effort to replace the corrupt electoral practices with ones that can be trusted. I will speak to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, and it will be absolutely central to the Foreign Office’s policy for Venezuela that we do all we can to assist in the holding of free, fair, trustworthy and properly democratic elections as soon as possible.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) on securing this urgent question, and I support the Minister’s words.

Since the 1530s, the indigenous nations and peoples of both Americas have suffered untold cruelty due to the political elites that have ruled them. When a legitimate, democratic Government returns in the future, will the UK Government, through the United Nations and other support agencies, support the immediate return of those indigenous peoples to Venezuela and ensure that the land that is rightfully theirs is given to them?

Sir Alan Duncan: One of our hopes is that most of the many millions who have fled to neighbouring countries will want to return. Venezuela is not like Syria, where the infrastructure has been completely flattened by conflict. We will design plans with our allies and partners, and I hope that many of those millions will want to and will return to their homes and livelihoods in Venezuela.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his very strong answers and his determined stance on TV last night—well done! We all endorse that. A Venezuelan teacher who was fleeing across the border was interviewed on the TV news last night, and she said that her teacher’s wage could buy only 12 eggs because of the inflation under a communist regime. Does the Minister agree that that is indicative of the shocking state of Venezuela? Shame on Sinn Féin for its unsurprising...
disgraceful support of a system that put President Maduro in place with no hint of a democratic process! This House must send a strong message, and that dictator must not be endorsed.

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is one of those rare moments in history when a country’s inflation must be measured in millions of per cent. It is almost impossible to get one’s mind around that extraordinary statistic.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about my appearance on television. Normally, I appear much more on foreign television screens, and therefore am much better known and popular abroad than at home.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the Minister and all colleagues, led by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), in this important matter.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy

4.23 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on the teacher recruitment and retention strategy.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Last year, we recruited more than 34,500 trainee teachers into the profession—more than 2,000 more than the year before—but the growing number of pupils means that we need even more teachers at a time when we have the most competitive labour market on record. Today, the Government launched the teacher recruitment and retention strategy, outlining our priorities ahead of the spending review. First, we are creating the right climate so headteachers can establish the right culture in their schools. Secondly, we are transforming the support for early career teachers. Thirdly, we are building a career structure that remains attractive as teachers’ lives and careers progress. Fourthly, we are making it easier for great people to become teachers.

At the heart of the strategy is the early career framework. Developed with teachers, headteachers, academics and experts, and endorsed by the Education Endowment Foundation, it underpins what all new teachers will be entitled to be trained in at the start of their career, in line with the best available evidence. The early career framework will underpin the fully funded two-year package of structured support for all early career teachers, including additional time off-timetable for teachers in their second year and fully funded mental health training.

By the time the new system is fully in place, we anticipate investing at least an additional £130 million every year to support the delivery in full of the early career framework. This will be a substantial investment, befitting the most significant change to the teaching profession since it became a graduate-only profession. In addition, the recruitment and retention strategy outlines how the Government will create the right climate for headteachers to establish supportive cultures in their schools in which unnecessary workload is driven down. This includes consulting on replacing the floor and coasting standards, with Ofsted’s “requires improvement” as the sole trigger for an offer of support.

The recruitment and retention strategy, including the early career framework, has been developed closely with the sector. Its publication marks a crucial milestone for the profession, as well as the start of a conversation between the Government and the profession about how best to deliver on the promise of this strategy.

Angela Rayner: The publication of this strategy is a credit to the school leaders, teachers and trade unions who have campaigned for years on this issue. Any serious attempt to tackle the workforce crisis, however overdue, is welcome, but today’s words must be matched by actions. Perhaps the Minister could start by acknowledging the scale of the problem. He has missed his targets six years running, and teacher numbers are declining as pupil numbers are increasing. Can he confirm that between 2016 and 2017 the number of full-time equivalent teachers in our classrooms fell by over 5,000?
The Minister mentioned the £180 million of funding, but at least £42 million of it was announced back in December 2017. How much is new money? The framework talks about “at least an additional £130 million pounds a year.”

Is that new funding from the Treasury, or is it being taken from other education spending, and if so, where from? Has the Treasury committed to this funding in the upcoming spending review, and does the “at least” mean that more money will be available if needed?

The concept of the new framework is welcome and long overdue, but can the Minister guarantee that every new teacher will be able to benefit from it? Specifically, will academies also be required to offer the additional time off-timetable for newly qualified teachers in their second year? For many schools, timetabling makes part-time work challenging. Where will they find the additional staff needed to make job shares work? Has he made any assessment of the number of teachers this could keep in or bring back into the profession?

On initial teacher training, how will the Minister ensure that smaller teacher training providers, such as school-centred providers, will not lose places? He pledged a review of teaching schools. What issues will this address and how will it be carried out? The strategy suggests that their functions will be taken on by multi-academy trusts. Will other schools be excluded? Will the strategy offer something for more experienced teachers? His most recent pay deal means that 250,000 teachers—the majority, in fact—are facing another real-terms pay cut. Can he confirm that today’s strategy does nothing to stop continued real-terms pay cuts in our schools? Surely he can acknowledge that teachers need more than the offer of part-time work.

Finally, the teaching workforce crisis cannot be separated from the years of cuts to pay and education budgets. Our teachers do invaluable work every day raising our next generation, and I thank them all. I hope that the Government will start valuing them with more than just warm words.

Nick Gibb: I do not really know how to react to the hon. Lady’s tone. This is a very effective recruitment and retention strategy, which has the support of the sector, and I should have thought that she would want to support it as well. The concept and structure of the strategy were driven by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and the details were developed by officials and by me in close consultation with the profession, the teachers’ unions and academics. I do not regard that as a matter for criticism.

The hon. Lady asks whether the £130 million is new money. It reflects what we think schools will need to support a 5% timetabled reduction for early-years career teachers, for mental health training and time and for the training programme. The Government are clear that they are committed to that funding, and it is new funding. It does not include the £42 million teacher development premium.

The hon. Lady asks about more experienced teachers. As she will see when she has a chance to read the strategy, it includes support for non-leadership career pathways for teachers who want to remain in the classroom. There will be a teacher development national professional qualification to enable them to enhance their careers without necessarily taking on leadership positions. We shall be announcing a procurement tender for initial teacher training providers and others.

The principal challenge that we face in teacher recruitment is the fact that we have a strong economy, with record numbers of jobs and the lowest unemployment since the 1970s. We are competing with other professions, such as commerce and industry, for the best graduates in our economy. A strong economy is not a challenge likely to face any Labour Government. Whenever Labour is in office, it damages the public finances, damages the economy and destroys jobs, whereas the Conservatives repair our economy, take a balanced approach to the public finances and create jobs—millions of jobs.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome this announcement—particularly amid the Brexit fog—and I welcome the work that my right hon. Friend and the Secretary of State are doing. Has either of them considered the idea of establishing local teacher training colleges in areas of strong deprivation, possibly linked to further education colleges, to encourage people in those areas to take up teaching?

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, welcome the new strategy, but it is long overdue. We have been raising these issues in the House for a number of years, and the Minister, and other Ministers, seems to have been in denial about what is causing them. That has been echoed in some of the Minister’s comments today. Tackling teacher recruitment and retention is not about a growing economy; it is about pay, workload and job satisfaction, so will the Minister now address those three key issues in a more strategic and substantive way than we have seen them addressed thus far?

Nick Gibb: We have been addressing those issues. For instance, we started to deal with workload in 2014. The workload challenge produced 44,000 responses identifying the top three issues: excessive marking work, data collection and lesson preparation. We addressed those with some workload review groups, and accepted their recommendations. This strategy, however, includes more measures to deal with workload. For example, the new Ofsted framework will include tackling teacher workload as an element of the leadership and management judgment that schools will face.

We are also doing more to ensure that the culture of schools is right. We are changing the accountability regime. There will not be a “football manager” approach. We are consulting today on replacing floor and coasting as triggers for support for schools with the simple “requires improvement” judgment of Ofsted. We have been engaged in a range of measures since 2010, and we
are taking a strategic approach to these issues as well. I think that if the hon. Lady reads the strategy, she will find that it addresses all her concerns.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. Does he share my hope that this new strategy marks the end of excessive marking and data entry, so that our teachers can spend more time doing what they came into the profession to do, which is teach, and not be overburdened by administration?

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Department and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State take very seriously the issue of tackling excessive workload. Teachers in this country work eight hours a week above the OECD average but work the same number of teaching hours as the OECD average. Those extra eight hours are spent, as my right hon. Friend said, on things such as excessive data collection and excessive marking. We have been addressing those issues, and this strategy continues to address them including through a new approach by Ofsted.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I appreciate that the strategy announced today is urgently needed to address the growing crisis in our schools, but should the Government not be taking time to recognise why there is such a dire need for a recruitment and retention strategy, and is it not a fact that stripping schools of resources and inflicting years of pay cuts have left teachers demoralised by the current regime in our schools?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Lady will know that we are spending a record amount of money on our schools: £43.5 billion by next year. Every local authority is seeing an increase in funding for every pupil in every school in the country. The School Teachers Review Body recommended a 3.5% pay rise for teachers on the main pay scale, and we have accepted a 2% pay rise for teachers on the upper pay scale and have agreed a 1.5% pay rise for headteachers on the leadership pay scale. We are funding that through a teacher pay grant over and above the 1% already budgeted.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): I welcome the fact that this plan has been co-signed by all the teaching unions. What measures will the Minister put in place to support rural teachers, particularly in underfunded areas such as mine in Cheshire, where they often face additional hurdles around accommodation and transport?

Nick Gibb: As I have said, we are taking a number of measures to tackle areas that have suffered particular historical challenges in recruiting teachers, including rural and coastal areas and areas of deprivation. The evidence suggests that within those areas different schools face different challenges, so it is often a school-level challenge, but we do have measures in place to direct funding particularly to areas of challenge, and we are rolling out this strategy to areas, including the north-east, Manchester and Bristol, that we know face particular social mobility challenges.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Is it not the case that to reduce workload in any significant way we simply need more teachers and more support staff in schools, so does the Minister agree that until the Treasury commits to a long-term plan that includes a significant real-terms increase in the education budget, the most he can hope for is to make marginal improvements?

Nick Gibb: Teaching remains an attractive profession. There are 450,000 teachers in the profession. Last year, we recruited 34,500 teachers, which is over 2,000 more than the year before, and that year we recruited more teachers than the year before that. We accepted the recommendation of the STRB of a 3.5% pay rise for teachers on the main pay scale. We added an extra £1.3 billion of school funding, which we announced in the summer of 2017. The Chancellor announced an extra £400 million in his Budget for small capital projects. We have announced an extra £250 million recently for special needs funding. And we have issued a pay grant to fund the pay increases over and above the 1% that schools will already have budgeted.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): May I put on the record my thanks to all the teachers in Redditch, who give all our young people such a great start in life? I, too, welcome this strategy, and note in particular the comments from the body that brings people from other professions into teaching as well as the support for the early career framework. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will continue to use best practice to attract the best people into the teaching profession?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The early career framework is built on best evidence of the approach to teaching. It is a welcome framework and focuses on those issues that teachers need to be trained in to be effective as teachers. I was struck by how different it is to enter into the teaching profession compared with other professions, such as chartered accountancy. There is a lot of support in the first few years of training to be an accountant, once one is in work. In the teaching profession, there is a steep learning curve in those early years, and we have been concerned about the high drop-out rate in the first few years of people’s careers.

The strategy seeks to give more support to teachers in those early years, because it is not just a recruitment strategy; it is also about increasing retention of those highly able people so that they stay in the profession—a profession they almost certainly love when they come into it, and which they can be driven out of by excessive workload and a lack of support.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Having done both that job and this one, I can absolutely agree that starting out as a teacher is harder than starting out as an MP. Although I welcome this strategy, which is long overdue, it does nothing to stem the real reasons why teachers are leaving: the toxic culture created in large part by this Government, the reduction of children to data points, and cuts to school budgets that have spread teachers’ good will as thin as it can get. The strategy will not fix that. We need to tackle the core issues, for example by abolishing Ofsted and putting in place something that teachers absolutely trust and by increasing massively the amount of high-quality professional development. What are the Minister’s plans to tackle the real reasons why teachers are leaving in the first place?
Nick Gibb: I agree with some of what the hon. Lady says. Data collection has been a burden and there has been an over-obsession with data and its collection. Ofsted has made it very clear in the new framework that it will not be seeking that data; it will not want to see any internal assessment data on the progress that pupils make. It will be looking at the wider curriculum and more substantive issues when schools are inspected.

The hon. Lady is right about workload, and both I and the Secretary of State take that very seriously. That is why we had the workload challenge in 2014 and why we have taken a series of measures to reduce both workload and data collection. We have a data collection toolkit and we have a leading academic from the Institute of Education looking into the question of data collection to try to get rid of some of the unnecessary data collection points that she mentions. Ofsted has just published its new framework for consultation, and that has landed well with the sector. When the hon. Lady has a chance to see it, she will see that it focuses on those things that really matter to a child’s education.

On CPD, one aim of the recruitment and retention strategy is to create a more diverse range of options for career progression, including a new teacher development national professional qualification—[Interruption.] I think I have said enough, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I have known the right hon. Gentleman for 33 years and I must say that he has a mildly eccentric approach to these matters. Nobody could accuse the Minister of State of excluding from his answer any matter that might at any stage to any degree be judged to be material—[Interruption] The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) has not stood, but I have just been advised that he has been twitching. Let’s hear the fellow.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): As I said in October 1990 when I raised the question of leadership with the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher—especially mentioning Peter Dawson, who had run Eltham Green before becoming general secretary of the Professional Association of Teachers—the culture that good heads can set, followed by other senior teachers, can bring people in not just to teach first but to teach second, bringing the experience of their own careers to expand our schools and academies. They can do a great deal of good for children across the country.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Headteachers play an important part in creating the right culture in schools, and the Government have a role to play in helping headteachers to create that culture. We want schools to acknowledge that we live in a strong economy with low levels of unemployment and a competitive jobs market so schools, like other employers, will need to be more flexible in their recruitment approach to allow more professionals to come into the profession on a part-time or flexible basis. We had a flexible working summit last year, because we want to encourage people to teach more flexibly.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is good that the Government finally accept that there is a recruitment and retention problem, but when does the Minister hope to wake up to the budget problems that are causing neglected repairs, reduced swimming and music lessons, curtailed extra-curricular activities and insufficient teaching assistants, particularly for special needs children?

Nick Gibb: We acknowledge the cost pressures on schools. As I said before, we are spending record amounts on schools, but there are of course increased pressures. We are asking schools to do more. Standards are rising, more children are reading more effectively earlier, we have better maths teaching, and more young people are taking at least two science GCSEs today than several years ago. That is why we are helping schools to tackle budget pressures, including through buying schemes for energy, insurance, computers and so on. We are also helping schools to balance their budgets when it comes to deploying staff. Tackling workload will be an important part of easing the cost pressures on schools.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I welcome this strategy. Two primary schools in the villages of Breachwood Green and Redbourn in my constituency have talked to me about the specific challenges they face because they are small rural schools. Will the Minister explain how the strategy will help to deal with such problems? Will he also meet with me to discuss the specific issues in those particular primary schools?

Nick Gibb: I am happy to discuss funding issues relating to particular schools with my hon. Friend. Small schools receive a fixed sum that helps to deal with some of the fixed costs appropriate to such schools, and there is also the sparsity funding element of the national funding formula. The formula is geared towards helping small or rural schools, but I appreciate that they will face cost pressures, and we are helping schools to tackle them with a range of measures.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): After talking to school leaders in Bristol South, I challenge the Minister on whether the money is sufficient to support them in delivering on the commitment. Given the existing large burdens on headteachers, what will he do to support the middle tier of teachers into becoming headteachers and future leaders?

Nick Gibb: We are investing in new and existing leadership qualifications and will do so disproportionately in more challenging areas of the country. As I said before, we are also developing our new national teacher development professional qualification for teachers who want to rise but do not necessarily want to go into leadership positions.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I welcome the intention behind the strategy, but I would like it to contain more than warm words. What measures will the Minister put in place in high-cost areas that do not receive outer-London weighting and where there is severe pressure on schools?

Nick Gibb: The national funding formula contains an area cost adjustment that takes into account the cost pressures of employing both teachers and non-teachers in such areas. This strategy involves £130 million of new funding, because we strongly believe that we want teachers
in the second year of their careers to have time off-timetables so that they can develop their teaching skills with support from a mentor and teacher training programmes.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is welcome that the strategy finally acknowledges the need to tackle excessive workloads for teachers if we are to bring the recruitment and retention crisis to an end. Given that secondary school pupil numbers are set to rise by 15% in the next decade, can the Minister guarantee that the funding that our schools need to implement the strategy will be provided quickly and effectively?

**Nick Gibb:** The funding will be provided when the strategy is fully rolled out in September 2021. We are rolling it out earlier, in September 2020, to Bradford, Doncaster, Greater Manchester and the north-east—I think I said Bristol earlier, but I actually meant Bradford. The strategy will be fully funded, and £130 million has been agreed with the Treasury despite the fact that it goes into the next spending review period.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I very much welcome this long overdue strategy. There is some evidence of burnout for teachers in mid and later career. Is the Minister looking to see which academy chains and local authorities perform well in teacher retention and which perform less well, and is he learning appropriate lessons from that?

**Nick Gibb:** As I mentioned earlier, the new Ofsted framework will be looking at things like teacher workload, as part and parcel of the leadership and management judgments made about a school. The Government take teacher workload extremely seriously, which is why we set up the three review groups to look at data management, excessive marking and lesson preparation. We have accepted all the recommendations of those three review groups.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): By definition, the most experienced teachers are the most expensive. One of the reasons for poor retention is that schools, particularly smaller primary schools, have to lay off those teachers because they cannot afford them within their budget. Will the Government look at how we can keep those teachers teaching, as they are the best because of that experience?

**Nick Gibb:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The national funding formula is distributing funding across our schools system in a far fairer way than in the past, and this recruitment and retention strategy should ease the cost pressures on schools. We have also introduced a teaching vacancy website, which is a free resource to enable schools to recruit free of charge, as the profession has been calling for a long time.

**Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Now that the Minister has acknowledged the scale of the recruitment and retention crisis, will he commit to funding the 3.5% pay offer in full? No ifs, no buts: in full.

**Nick Gibb:** We have already said that we are funding the pay rise to which we have agreed. The 3.5% is being funded, over and above the 1% that schools have already budgeted. That is what the pay grant is all about, and we are distributing over £500 million this year and next year to fund that pay rise.
Point of Order

4.52 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As a result of being moved on to universal credit, some disabled people lose out on vital premiums, including the severe disability premium. I have tabled multiple written questions asking how many severely disabled people have been naturally migrated or moved on to universal credit since June 2018, and the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work has responded that the information could be provided only at a disproportionate cost. That is despite information having been provided for the period between May 2015 and February 2018.

This information is of national importance, as the Government have tabled secondary legislation to backdate payments for severely disabled people who have lost out on these vital premiums as a result of moving on to universal credit. Mr Speaker, can you advise me on how I can obtain this information from the Department for Work and Pensions and ensure that it is published?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her courtesy in giving me advance notice of her intention to raise this point of order. It is understandably frustrating, disconcerting and irritating for an hon. Member not to receive substantive replies to the questions that she or he has put, so I understand and empathise with her. It is an experience that I often had as a Back-Bench Member. The words, “Can be provided only at disproportionate cost” were always, at the very least, disappointing.

My advice to the hon. Lady is that she should make the short journey from here to the Table Office, where she can be advised as to the avenues open to her to try to extract the information. That may be through the reformulation of questions, it might be by pursuit of a debate, or it could be by use of other means to ensure the public provision of the information she seeks. The distinguished staff of the Table Office are always keen to help and, if she beetles across to the Table Office, I feel sure that they would be keen to do so.

BILL PRESENTED

Drone (Regulation) (No.2) Bill
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Peter Bone, supported by Esther McVey, Gordon Henderson, Jonathan Lord, Philip Davies, Henry Smith and Steve Double, presented a Bill to require drones to be marked and registered and to broadcast certain information electronically; to place restrictions on drone flight near aerodromes; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 8 February, and to be printed (Bill 325).

Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill
Second Reading

Mr Speaker: I should inform the House that I have not selected any of the reasoned amendments that appear on the Order Paper.

4.55 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Concern over uncontrolled immigration was at the heart of the debate in the run-up to the European Union referendum. The result left no doubt: people in the UK want control over our borders. They want a fair system that works for the entire UK, that attracts the brightest and the best from around the globe, and that allows access to the UK based on what someone has to offer, not where they come from. Leaving the EU means just that. For the first time in more than 40 years, we can deliver this by putting control over who comes to the UK firmly in our hands. Ending free movement is the first step, and that is what the Bill delivers.

This is not about closing our doors—far from it. That is something I would never allow. We will continue to be an open, outward-looking and welcoming nation, because immigration has been invaluable to Britain. Immigrants to this country, such as my own parents, have been essential to the success of our society, culture and economy. They have powered—indeed, they have often created—many of our businesses. They have helped to deliver vital public services. Their experience has brought new perspectives and expertise, stimulating growth and making us the tolerant, outward-looking nation we are today. Far from slamming the door on immigration, the end of free movement will be a clear path to a fairer immigration system, helping us to welcome the most talented workers from any country while cutting net migration to sustainable levels.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Home Secretary is giving a good account of why immigration is good for this country. Does he think that people who voted leave voted against free movement of labour as a policy, or against immigration?

Sajid Javid: For many people who voted leave in that referendum, immigration was one of the big, key issues. Many of them would have wanted, first, to see immigration coming down to more sustainable levels. It was certainly my experience that many of them wanted us to end freedom of movement and reform the process so that we could have more control over our borders.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that the Home Secretary, like many of us in the Chamber, has received emails from people expressing concern about how the health service will get labour from abroad—from Europe or wherever—and asking what protections British nationals abroad will have. Those people also perform a function at work in the various countries that make up Europe, so what protections will they have, as a quid pro quo on this?
Sajid Javid: There are two issues there. First, on protections for British nationals working in other parts of the EU, we very much hope that other EU countries respond in the way we are doing—we are guaranteeing EU citizens’ rights whether there is a deal or no deal. The hon. Gentleman also referred to the importance of immigration to our public services, including the health service, which I just referenced a moment ago. That will very much be retained under the new immigration system.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Is not the crucial balance to strike between people’s ability to come here in search of work rather than for a specific job, which is what has caused so much tension in constituencies such as mine, and our ability to make sure that we do all we can to attract the vital skilled labour that the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) mentioned, such as nurses and doctors?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with how my hon. Friend describes the issue. This is about putting the UK in control of who comes to the UK, so we can be certain that that will benefit our economy and society.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Home Secretary makes a good case for the importance of a firm but fair immigration policy, but does he accept that when we implement such a policy, it also has to be of a firm but fair immigration policy, but does he accept that when we implement such a policy, it also has to be civilised? With that in mind, does he intend to do anything about the national shame of the 10,000 migrants in holding centres in this country?

Sajid Javid: I assume that my right hon. Friend is concerned about it. It is important that we continue to make sure that at all times it is seen as fair and compassionate. I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend has raised this issue, his concern about which seems to be shared by other Members. If it would be helpful, I would be happy to discuss the issue further with my right hon. Friend and other right hon. and hon. Members who are concerned about it. It is important that we continue to look into the policy and see what more we can do to improve it.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): How can we talk about fairness and compassion? My Bridgend constituency office takes on very few immigration cases; most of the immigration into Wales comes from England. Where I have problems—despite the English—is in cases in which my constituents have married abroad and cannot then get their partners and children back into the UK. One of my constituents, Mr Jenkins, has been told that his wife will have to leave when their youngest child reaches their 18th birthday. How can that be fair and compassionate? How can I tell EU citizens in my constituency to trust the new legislation when we do not even know what it is?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady refers to the policy on family reunion or bringing spouses to this country. The rules, which include a minimum income requirement, are the will of the House. They are what the House has previously decided in legislation, and I think it is fair to have rules on bringing spouses from abroad into this country and on family reunion. That is right, but it is also right that we constantly review the rules to make sure that they continue to be fair at all times.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): A part of being fair is dealing with matters promptly. When the former Labour Government were in power, about 15,000 people who were here illegally were dealt with every year and returned. That number fell to 5,000. Does my right hon. Friend aim to improve those numbers so that we actually deal, fairly and quickly, with people who are here illegally, rather than detaining them for a very long time in the sort of circumstances that were described earlier?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I think that the 5,000 number to which he refers is with respect to foreign national offenders only. When it comes to removing people from this country, or deporting them because they are here illegally, the number is, I think, a lot higher, but his point is important, and we need to make sure that we properly enforce the rules that we have in place.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Are we not already conflating issues in a way that clouds the whole of the immigration debate? There are people who come here primarily to work who are legally entitled to do so either because of our membership of the European Union or because they have the requisite visas. There are people who want to come here to work but do not have a right and often enter illegally, and then there are those who, in escaping the terrors of war or some other horrors, quite rightly seek asylum in our country. It is important not only to draw these very distinct differences between them but, in any event, to treat everybody fairly and with dignity.
Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman that he is down on the speaking list—something for later.

Sajid Javid: Mr Deputy Speaker, I think that that was the hon. Gentleman’s speech, so you can take him off your list.

The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. Let me emphasise that the evidence that the MAC has considered is reflected in its recommendations. He will know that, in our response in the White Paper, while we have very much based things on the evidence presented, there are still things that require further engagement before we design and settle on exactly what the future system looks like.

We also asked the MAC to review the position of international students. It recommended that there should continue to be no limits on the number of international students we welcome to study in our country, and that will of course remain our approach. As my hon. Friend the Member for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation has strongly campaigned for, we will continue to be an open and welcoming country for international students. Our world-class universities will continue to be able to attract global talent, and we will make it easier for the brightest and best graduates to stay and work here.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary just confirm for the record that the Government formally dump their commitment to a net migration target—to reducing migration down to the tens of thousands? If I am wrong, will he at least confirm that international students will not be included in that ridiculous target?

Sajid Javid: There are no targets in our White Paper, which sets out our approach to the future immigration system. That said, we are still very clear, as I have already set out, that we must continue to work to bring net migration down to more sustainable levels.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Would the Home Secretary just clarify the exact position of students? He only half answered the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) regarding international students, and he knows my hon. Friend’s commitment to excellent tertiary education here in the UK.

Sajid Javid: I am happy to clarify that there is absolutely no cap on student numbers. There is no limit on the number of students we wish to welcome into our country.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State share my concern that the rhetoric that has built up around migration is already having an impact on student recruitment? The University of Nottingham tells me that there has been a significant drop-off in recruitment, particularly at postgraduate level. Is not his policy simply exacerbating those problems?

Sajid Javid: I am sorry, but I do not accept the hon. Lady’s point. The current number of international students in this country—I believe that the figure is more than 450,000—is the highest we have ever had, so the facts do not bear out the hon. Lady’s comments.

This Bill is fundamental to our future immigration system. First, it will end freedom of movement. All related EU legislation that is retained in UK law under the withdrawal Act will be repealed. This will make European economic area and Swiss nationals and their families, subject to UK immigration rules. Like people from other countries around the world, they will need permission to enter and remain in the UK. In place of
that, we will introduce a new system that will level the playing field by ending preferential treatment for EU citizens. It will mean that everyone will have the same opportunity to come to the UK, regardless of where they are from.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): As the Home Secretary is well aware, the soft fruit industry is vital to my constituency. Will he therefore assure me that our future immigration policy will also take account of seasonal labour?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend some assurance. I know that she has welcomed the pilot for seasonal agricultural workers that we have already announced. Once we have had the pilot, we will look at how we can incorporate such a scheme in the future immigration system.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend when he says how valuable all the people who are already here under free movement are, because they all have to be self-sufficient when they are here and they are all doing vital jobs. I also agree with him when he says how valuable international students are, and that we have no wish at all to see any reduction in bona fide students coming here from Europe. What I do not quite understand is which of these vital and valuable categories of people he intends to reduce the numbers of in the future, given that he keeps repeating the slogan, “Ending freedom of movement”. What is the policy point of changing our present arrangements if they have brought such valuable people to this country over the past years?

Sajid Javid: I am very happy to answer that question. First, our new system will allow us to help people to enter the UK based on their skills and not their nationality, so it is going to be their skills that will count. My right hon. and learned Friend also questioned how, in that case, by still welcoming the people with the skills, and the students, that we need, we will reduce net migration to more sustainable levels. The answer is in the approach that has been set out in the White Paper based on the evidence from the Migration Advisory Committee. The MAC clearly says in its evidence that if we have a policy that is focused on skills and not nationality, and focus more on high skills than low skills, that is consistent both with meeting the needs of the economy and reducing net migration down to more sustainable levels.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Farmers in my constituency, particularly dairy farmers, have for many generations welcomed EU migrants who have come to work on their dairy farms. They are worried that the £30,000 cap will affect their ability to recruit. Will the Home Secretary outline whether he plans to look at the amount that the cap is set at?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend an assurance that the final threshold for the high skills determination has not been set yet. As we set out in the White Paper, we recognise that the recommendation from the Migration Advisory Committee is £30,000, but we will be engaging thoroughly over a number of months to determine what the actual threshold should be so that we can be comfortable that it works for the economy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I will give way once more, to the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), and then make some progress.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am glad that the Home Secretary is looking at the £30,000 threshold, but does he accept that the salary may not be commensurate with the skill level, and that what is important is that we look at the skills needs and do not set some arbitrary figure as a proxy for that?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that there is already such acceptance in the current immigration system for non-EEA migrants. For example, within the current system there is a shortage occupation list—a system that we will keep in place going forward—which recognises that in some cases where there is a shortage, we need to change the salary threshold. There will be flexibilities built into the system going forward, and a lot of that is explained in the White Paper.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sajid Javid: I will make some progress and give way later.

Secondly, this Bill will protect the rights of Irish citizens. We are very proud of our deep and historic ties with Ireland. When free movement ends, Irish citizens will continue to be able to come to the UK to live and work as they do now. British and Irish citizens have enjoyed a special status and specific rights in each other’s countries for almost 100 years. The Bill will preserve rights that Irish citizens currently have in the UK—the same rights that British citizens enjoy in Ireland. This includes the right to work, to study, to access healthcare and social security benefits, and to vote. The only exception is where an Irish citizen is subject to deportation exclusion orders, as now, or to an international travel ban. Our close ties with Ireland will remain. Our historical bond is unbreakable. The Government have always been firm in their commitment to preserve the long-standing common travel area arrangements. This Bill reaffirms our intention to preserve our special relationship and to continue to stand side by side with Ireland after we leave the EU.

Thirdly, the Bill gives us the basis to build a legal framework for the future immigration system. It includes a power to make amendments to primary and secondary legislation that become necessary after the end of free movement. This will enable us to ensure that UK legislation remains coherent once we leave the EU. It means that we can align our treatment of EU and non-EU migrants depending on the final design of the UK’s future skills-based immigration system, and that we can accommodate any trade deals that we agree with the EU and with other countries.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary talks about aligning treatment of EU and non-EU citizens. It currently costs £1,220 to apply for leave to remain whereas it costs only £120 to administer that service. Will he at least commit in this Bill to stop profiteering from people’s immigration status?
Sajid Javid: No one is profiteering from charges that come through the immigration system. In fact, those charges currently do not even cover the full cost. The rest of the cost is covered by general taxes.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I wonder how the Secretary of State will align things for the economy of the highlands, where a full 20% of the economy is based on tourism and unemployment is traditionally low. How can that be reconciled with the threshold he is introducing for workers’ wages? What does he say to people who are running businesses in the tourism industry across the highlands and islands?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that immigration is a reserved matter, but it is very important that we engage with all nations, regions and communities. As we develop the new immigration system set out in the White Paper, I will ensure that that engagement happens and that we set up a system that represents the needs of the entire UK.

Fourthly, in addition to immigration measures, the Bill will allow us to adapt our benefits system as we leave the EU. It will enable the UK to change the retained social security arrangements for EEA and Swiss nationals. British people living abroad will also benefit. The social security powers in the Bill will allow amendments to the retained EU social security co-ordination regime. That will help us to deliver effective support for people and to set up a system that represents the needs of the entire UK.

This Bill is just the beginning of our future border and immigration system. We plan to phase in that system, to give individuals and businesses time to adapt. Of course, if we leave the EU without a deal, there will be no implementation period, but we will continue to deliver on the referendum result and end free movement. The automatic right to come to the UK will stop once the Bill is commenced. We will not hesitate to take back control of our borders.

As set out in our no-deal policy paper, which I will publish later today, we will also introduce transitional arrangements to minimise any disruption. Copies of the policy paper will be placed in the Library of the House. This will ensure that we take a practical approach and that the UK stays open for business. Under the arrangements, EEA and Swiss nationals will be able to come here for up to three months without a visa. They will continue to use e-gates, as they do now, and they will not face additional checks at the border. They will be allowed to work temporarily but will need to apply for leave and pay an application fee if they want to stay longer.

We plan to grant them three years’ leave, subject to identity, security and criminality checks. That will give us time to fully design the new immigration system. EEA and Swiss nationals who are already living here and ensure that there is no sudden shake-up to UK businesses as the future system is put in place. But the leave will be strictly temporary. It cannot be extended, and those who wish to stay will need to meet our future immigration requirements.

The transitional period will last until 31 December 2020, when our EU settlement scheme closes, and from that point on, businesses will be expected to check that EEA citizens have an immigration status before allowing them to start work. Let me be clear: this policy does not apply to those here before exit day, whose rights to live and work here in the UK will be protected by the EU settlement scheme. We want them to stay, and we value them hugely.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I thank the Home Secretary for giving way; he is being very generous. What is the Government’s estimate of the economic cost of these changes? Why does he think it is worth damaging the economy, with the effect that this may have on jobs and livelihoods?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have set out an economic analysis of the deal and exit from the EU, including in a no-deal scenario. I point him to that.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the Home Secretary recognise that ending freedom of movement is a huge loss for many people—not just for businesses and for our economy, but for families and friends here in the UK now? Will he actually own up to the fact that, as we should be reminding people, ending freedom of movement means that the freedom of movement for young people in this country to visit, stay and work in other countries will be massively reduced—we are shrinking our young peoples’ opportunities—and that if our goal is to reduce immigration, this is perversely because immigration from non-EU countries is actually going up while immigration from EU countries is going down?

Sajid Javid: I think the hon. Lady and I will have to agree to have different points of view. I respect her view, but I think one of the clear messages from the referendum result was that many people felt we needed an immigration system that is designed in Britain and built in Britain and which is designed specifically to meet the long-term needs of our economy and our society, and that is what we have set out in the White Paper. The independent work by the Migration Advisory Committee—the analysis it has done by looking at the immigration systems of other successful industrialised economies—shows that it is not necessary to have freedom of movement or something similar to freedom of movement in order to have a successful country and society.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): First, as the daughter of Irish immigrants who came here to rebuild England after the war, I welcome the Home Secretary’s comments on the common travel area. That is hugely welcome, because it has been a source of great concern.

The Home Secretary has just used “Britain” as opposed to the United Kingdom. Earlier today, I met businesses and civic society from Northern Ireland that are already losing people from Northern Ireland who are going back to their country of origin or, indeed, moving a few miles south. Who is he talking to in Northern Ireland to
address some of these issues, and what are his Government now doing about that in the event of a no-deal scenario in only 60 days’ time?

Sajid Javid: As I mentioned following the question from the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), it is important that we have an immigration system that represents the needs of every part of the UK, of course including Northern Ireland. In developing the White Paper, we have already talked to people from Northern Ireland—businesses, elected representatives and others—and we will continue to do so as we finalise the policy set out in the White Paper. Over the coming year, we will have a year-long engagement that will include every nation, every region and every community in the UK.

We are planning on the basis that, deal or no deal, from 2021 the future immigration system will be in place. It is right that we deliver on our promise to the people of the UK and that we legislate to end free movement, but if the future system is to be truly fit for purpose we must also learn the lessons from Windrush. We must put people first and make it easier for them to navigate the system. This work is under way, and we have already commissioned the Law Commission to review the existing immigration rules. I welcome its work to find ways to make them more accessible, and I look forward to receiving its recommendations later this year. They will help to inform the next stage of our future system, developing new immigration rules to set out that approach.

The proposals outlined in the White Paper have already prompted some debate. I have said that they are the starting point for a national conversation on what the future system should be. We will be discussing the detail with businesses, organisations and community representatives across the UK during this year, and I look forward to those conversations progressing. We are listening and we are taking our time to ensure that we get it right, but there can be only one end result. We must deliver what the British people asked for: exiting the EU and seizing this once-in-a-generation opportunity to redefine our immigration system. This Bill is a key part of that process. It ends freedom of movement and it gives us full control, building a fair and sustainable system that people can count on. It is a system fit for the welcoming and diverse nation we all love, and a system designed in the UK for the UK. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.29 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): This is an important debate, not least because issues around migration lay at the heart of much of the debate on Brexit. I would make the following point to Ministers. To the extent that they continue to confuse migration in general with the specific issue of freedom of movement, they are not helping the clarity of the debate.

During the recent debate on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill, the Home Secretary said that he was “determined to continue to have an immigration system that welcomes the very best talent from across the world, helping us to build an open, welcoming and outward looking post-Brexit Britain.”—[Official Report, 11 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 700.] If only that were the case. The truth is that the Bill, the immigration White Paper and the accompanying media narrative play to some of the very worst aspects of the Brexit debate. In the process, the Bill risks doing irreparable damage to business, the economy and society.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): On the basis of what my right hon. Friend has just said, with which I very much agree, can she confirm that the Labour Front Bench will vote against the Bill tonight?

Ms Abbott: I can only thank my hon. Friend for her helpful intervention. She will have to wait for me to complete my remarks.

Let me quote:

“The new immigration system must command public confidence and support the economy. These proposals would achieve neither. The proposals don’t meet the UK’s needs and would be a sucker punch for many firms right across the country”.

Who said that? It was not a Labour MP but the Confederation of British Industry.

One example of how the Government, far from seeking the best talent, will potentially make it harder for industry and the public sector to recruit the best talent is the suggested salary threshold that the Home Secretary has put out to consultation. He has spoken about “focussing on high skilled migration not low-skilled migration”.

But he is actually proposing an income-based system. It would allow derivative traders, private equity investors and merchant bankers in, but it would exclude nurses, social care workers, scientific researchers and many more. Salary is not a proxy for the level of skill, and a salary-based immigration system will not work for incentivising high-skilled migration. For example, many science research roles have starting salaries of around £22,000, and the 1% pay cap imposed on the public sector has held down wages in public sector science in particular. A salary threshold is wrong in principle and setting it at £30,000 would have an extremely damaging impact on science and public services.

The Home Secretary has pointed out that a salary threshold currently applies to non-EEA migrants, but we would argue that we should not be levelling down at this stage, but assuring fairness all round.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I read my right hon. Friend’s article in the Morning Star on Saturday, which said that “The...Tory Immigration Bill will deepen the exploitation of workers.” We are not abstaining on the Bill this evening, are we?

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for quoting from my article in the Morning Star. I am not sure if that is the first time he has read that paper, but I will expand further on that issue in my remarks.

I now turn to the very serious issue of the proposal for new 12-month visas. Nowhere is this floating of the right to family life more blatant than in the case of the proposed new category of temporary workers. They will only be allowed to come here for 12 months at a time, without the right to bring their families, and perhaps then be deported. Do the Government not realise that their 12-month visas will be attractive only to the most desperate workers? It will potentially lead to huge churn in the workforce, and create a category of
second-class workers with no rights who are open to unscrupulous exploitation in the growth of the informal economy.

We oppose the creation of a two-tier workforce. That would have the effect, which some incorrectly claim, freedom of movement does, of lowering wages and rights for all. Workers should have rights as workers and not be prey to some of the most unscrupulous employers. There is a genuine need for temporary workers in a certain number of sectors, such as agriculture and some aspects of the hospitality industry. We appreciate that the Government are piloting a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme, but there is no requirement for this type of insecure temporary work to become the norm across the economy. It should not become enshrined in a widely cast law.

Let me turn now to the flimsy nature of this proposed legislation. This may be one of the flimsiest pieces of proposed legislation on a major issue that I, and many others, have ever seen. Worse than that, it is supplemented by a whole slew of Henry VIII powers that the Government and the Secretary of State intend to grant to themselves. It is easy to demonstrate just how undemocratic those powers are. The Government claim they are a tidying up exercise and no new powers will be granted or exercised. However, our current immigration system is so untidy that it has the capacity to ruin lives—indeed, it frequently does ruin lives. If this were a Labour Government attempting to grant themselves these powers, we would be denounced for making a constitutional power grab and mounting a coup, to coin a phrase. We will be opposing the assumption of these sweeping powers without tying them to specific policies. We will not be offering a blank cheque, which the Government can redeem at any time they are in trouble and are tempted to whip up anti-migrant sentiment as a distraction. We on the Labour Benches also say that the Government need to accept the recommendations of the Law Commission. We need to simply and clarify our existing immigration system first before changing anything in relation to EU citizens here.

Moving on to the question of freedom of movement, the Labour party is clear that when Britain leaves the single market, freedom of movement ends. We set that out in our 2017 manifesto. I am a slavish devotee of that single market, freedom of movement ends. We set that out in our 2017 manifesto. I am a slavish devotee of that single market, freedom of movement ends. We set that out in our 2017 manifesto. I am a slavish devotee of that single market, freedom of movement ends. We set that out in our 2017 manifesto. I am a slavish devotee of that single market, freedom of movement ends. We set that out in our 2017 manifesto. I am a slavish devotee of that single market, freedom of movement ends. We set that out in our 2017 manifesto. I am a slavish devotee of that single market, freedom of movement ends. We set that out in our 2017 manifesto. I am a slavish devotee of that single market, freedom of movement ends.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. I do not wish to launch any type of personal criticism of her, as she has actually been making an extremely coherent, root-and-branch criticism of the Bill, and she has an excellent record on these things. The problem is that we are meant to be debating whether this House of Commons should approve the Second Reading of a Bill. She has denounced it from beginning to end, but says that the official Opposition do not intend to vote against it. That makes the proceedings quite absurd.

The right hon. Lady is in the same position as the Home Secretary, who could think of no reason why any group coming under existing EU law should be reduced, except that we have to say that we are against freedom of movement. All the right hon. Lady can say is that she has not seen it from beginning to end but says that the official Opposition do not intend to vote against it. That makes the proceedings quite absurd.

Ms Abbott: I am loth to disagree with the Father of the House, but he will be aware—more than any other Member, because he has been here longer—that this is not the end of our deliberations on the Bill. As has happened many times before, we will see how it is amended in Committee before we take a decision on how we vote on Third Reading, which will be the end of the deliberations.

One thing we hope will be addressed when the Bill goes into Committee is indefinite administrative detention. I was a Member of Parliament when immigration detention as we now know it was introduced. When some of us queried the lack of due process surrounding it, we were told not to concern ourselves because people would be detained for only short periods immediately prior to being deported. Now we have a monstrous system where people are held in administrative detention for a year or more. Ministers insist that detention is not indefinite, but if someone is in a detention centre, cut off from their friends and family, with no idea when they will be released, it certainly feels like indefinite detention to them.

It has long been my view that we should end indefinite detention, and the Labour party’s commitment to ending it was set out clearly in the 2017 manifesto. I welcome the fact that Members on both sides of the House are coming round to that point of view. One can only hope that the Bill is amended along those lines in Committee.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?
Ms Abbott: Before I bring my remarks to a close, I have a few questions to ask Ministers. First, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, when will the Government actually implement the Bill and repeal free movement? Does the Secretary of State accept that there is some lack of clarity about the position of Irish citizens? [Interruption.] Conservative Members are laughing about the position of Irish citizens, but Irish citizens have come to Opposition Members to express their concerns about the current lack of clarity.

Anna McMorrin: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ms Abbott: Will the automatic deportation regime imposed by the UK Borders Act 2007 also now apply to Irish citizens? Do the Government accept that ending free movement for EU citizens would also end free movement for other groups of UK workers, including UK scientists, and limit their ability to work on pan-European research projects? Do they accept that, unless each EU country legislates otherwise, British citizens travelling to EU countries will be immediately treated as third country nationals, so they will lose their free movement rights?

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms Abbott: In conclusion, the Home Secretary said in the debate on the withdrawal deal:

“Concern over uncontrolled immigration from the EU was a major factor in the decision to leave the EU.”—[Official Report, 11 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 698.]

Who whipped up that concern? Could it have been the political party that introduced completely bogus immigration targets—targets that have never been met, were never intended to be met and were just a vehicle for anti-immigrant sentiment and targets that the current Home Secretary seems unwilling to stand by? Could it have been whipped up by the “Go home” vans? I saw them driving through my constituency in east London, and I have to tell the Home Secretary—in case he is not aware—that they represent a low point in our migration policy, having been designed to intimidate and strike fear into the hearts of people who were here perfectly legally.

Or was the concern whipped up by the introduction of the hostile environment? I would be the first to say that some of its elements were introduced under a Labour Government, but the majority were brought in post 2010, when the current Prime Minister was Home Secretary, and I voted against the legislation. As a consequence of the hostile environment, sick people were denied cancer treatment, which horrified the public when they read about it for the first time, and people were evicted from their homes because they could not get the benefits they were entitled to. People were detained—I met women detained under the hostile environment on my visit to Yarl’s Wood last year—and deported, and people who had gone home to the Caribbean for a holiday—

Sajid Javid rose—

Ms Abbott: I give way to the Home Secretary.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady will know that the historical review of what has been known as Windrush shows that almost half those affected were under a Labour Government. This Government have apologised for their role. Does she want to take this opportunity to apologise on behalf of the previous Labour Government for their mistakes?

Ms Abbott: The Home Secretary knows perfectly well that I never voted for those aspects of Labour policy, and I made the point that some of the aspects of the hostile environment, particularly in relation to the health service, were introduced under a Labour Government.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Home Secretary should not be trying to score political points on what is quite a serious issue and that it is not for her to apologise for what a past Labour Government did? We are talking about what this Government have done in relation to the Windrush scandal and the hostile environment policies they introduced.

Ms Abbott: Rather than trying to score the political points, the public would want the Home Secretary to move much faster in sorting out the Windrush scandal and to look further into its effects, because persons from the Caribbean were not the only Commonwealth cohort affected. Unless the Home Secretary moves faster and with more will, other cohorts of persons from all parts of the former British empire will be treated in the way in which the Windrush persons were treated.

Anna McMorrin: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ms Abbott: Above all, the consequence of the Windrush scandal was that a whole generation of people who came here after the war to what they thought of as the mother country, to rebuild that mother country, were humiliated and degraded. I think that that generation and their relatives and friends would appreciate a more serious contemplation of this issue in the House tonight.

Anna McMorrin: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ms Abbott: Finally, let me say this. Migration has been a question for heated debate in this country over the decades. The Bill represented an opportunity for us to start to build a fairer immigration system across the board.

Anna McMorrin: On that point, will my right hon. Friend give way?

Ms Abbott: We will wait to see how the Bill emerges from Committee, but I say to Ministers who are sitting there smirking that literally millions of people in this country have been detrimentally affected by poor immigration legislation—not just under this Government, but under previous Governments—and want to see reform. We will not be supporting the Bill tonight, but we will be watching to see what emerges from the Committee stage.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I must say to Back Benchers that we will start off with a nine-minute limit.
I absolutely respect the fact that there are very important matters to be covered this evening. What has been said so far has demonstrated the breadth and depth of the issues surrounding immigration. I thank all the organisations that have sent us briefings for the debate, and I hope to be able to sweet-talk the Whips so that I can sit on the Bill Committee and have a chance to consider some of those issues in more detail. To be honest, I did not expect to be the first Back Bencher to be called, and I assumed that all the important points would have been made earlier. I do not want people to think that I am being shallow in raising one rather niche issue relating to immigration. We talk about talent. Given that you can take the girl out of the sports Ministry but cannot take the sports Ministry out of the girl, I am sure many Members will not be surprised to learn that I want to make a brief point about the connection between the future immigration rules and football.

Because we are friends, and because I have no doubt bored the Immigration Minister to tears with sports stuff over the years, I know she understands that football is not just about people running around on a pitch kicking a ball; I know she “gets” the fact that the Premier League and the English Football League bring a phenomenal amount of money to our economy. That success depends largely on Premier League clubs’ having the access that they require to world-class talent both on the pitch and in the dugout, while allowing our home-grown talent the opportunity to play with and for the world’s best, day in, day out. The impact of that is clear from England’s most recent World cup results—and ours was the only national team 100% of whose players came from their home league.

Other European leagues are licking their lips in the belief that Brexit will present them with a recruitment and competitive advantage over the Premier League, and that, post-Brexit, the Premier League will have to work within an immigration system that presents hurdles to the recruitment of the world’s best talent, both within the EU and outside it. The last thing that Brexit should be is a gift to leagues that, despite already having far fewer visa requirements for players, have so far been unable to match the popularity of the Premier League on equal terms. I recognise that those principles can be applied to any employer in any sector, but I hope that the House will generously forgive me for raising that issue here, given I am no longer in a position to do so behind the scenes as a Minister.

This important Bill takes forward the will of the people as set out in the referendum result on 23 June 2016. I wish that I could raise far more of the important points that have been made, and I look forward to hearing other Members’ speeches. I also look forward—hopefully—to sitting on the Bill Committee.

Anna McMorrin: Will the hon. Lady give way?
Tracey Crouch: Of course.

Anna McMorrin: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I wanted to make this point during the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott).

I disagree with the hon. Lady. The majority of people do not want this immigration crackdown, which will damage our economy and harm our communities. The
Bill goes against our values of openness and inclusiveness. I want a country based on fairness and tolerance, but the Bill provides for neither. That is why I will vote against it, and I hope that Opposition Front Benchers will, too.

Tracey Crouch: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I am pleased that I was able to give way to her so that she could make her point, which was well made. Members in all parts of the House will have strong views on this issue. I was going to say, before the hon. Lady completed her final sentence, that if she wished to vote against the Bill, she would not need the permission of her Front Bench to do so.

This Bill is needed, regardless of whether we have plan A, plan B, or no deal. I look forward to supporting my Government—and, indeed, my friend the Minister—during its passage.

5.59 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is always nice to start with a note of consensus, so let me say that I agree that we need an immigration Bill and I welcome the one solitary clause in relation to Irish nationals. Sadly, that is where the consensus ends. Let me say unequivocally that the Scottish National party opposes the Second Reading of the Bill.

There is so much wrong with the UK immigration system that needs fixing, but this Bill will not fix anything: in fact, it will make things much worse. The UK immigration system is built on the flawed twin pillars of a ludicrous net migration target and an obnoxious hostile environment policy exposed in all its nastiness by the Windrush scandal. That scandal is yet to be adequately and fully investigated or resolved. Meanwhile, the chief inspector of borders and immigration points out that the Home Office makes no effort to measure the effects of the hostile environment, but we know that turning NHS workers, landlords and bank staff into border guards has had terrible implications for too many people. This Bill does not end the ludicrous net migration target or the hostile environment; instead it will see more people ensnared by both.

We have the disgraceful situation of being alone in Europe in insisting that indefinite detention is perfectly okay simply for immigration purposes. Report after report flags up the terrible effect it has on detainees, yet there is nothing in this Bill to fix it.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making excellent points about indefinite detention. Does he agree that one reason why the Government and Conservative MPs argue for indefinite detention is that they claim that otherwise there will be a pull factor and more people will come in? Actually, that has been disproved: academic studies show that there is no pull factor in this, so there is no need to have indefinite detention.

Stuart C. McDonald: There is absolutely no need for indefinite detention and the fact that we are the only country in Europe that has to show it shows that every other country manages perfectly well without it. Basically, it is an affront to democracy and the rule of law. It is a human rights disgrace and the Bill should be used to scrap it altogether.

We have among the most anti-family immigration rules in the world, splitting up partners, spouses and parents from children if the UK sponsor cannot meet the £18,600 financial threshold.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend might recall the family who ran the village shop in Laggan in the highlands, the Zielsdorfs. The shop they ran was a vital component of the community and well loved by the community, but they were deported to Canada by this Government under the current rules. Does my hon. Friend agree that even under the current rules the Government cannot even support our armed services personnel to be put together with their families, as raised by me in Prime Minister’s questions this week in the case of Denis Omondi and Ann in Kenya?

Stuart C. McDonald: I saw my hon. Friend’s question to the Prime Minister and it gave yet another horrendous example of the types of family these immigration rules are splitting apart.

Some 40% of the total population is not able to meet the financial threshold set out in the immigration rules, but that proportion is significantly higher for women, ethnic minorities and certain communities across the country. Every week we hear stories such as the one referred to by my hon. Friend. These rules are wicked, but this Bill will result in their application to hundreds of thousands more families in future. Some 500,000 UK citizens currently live here with an EU partner or spouse. That gives an idea of how many future relationships will be impacted in the years ahead. Rules for other families are just as outrageous. This Bill does not end these anti-family policies; it will destroy more families.

We put families with children on “no recourse to public funds” visas, increasing the risk of exploitation and cost-shunting on to overstretched local authorities. Again there is nothing in the Bill to fix that, but more people will end up with “no recourse to public funds” visas. The UK immigration system has become ludicrously complicated and is characterised by poor decision-making and massive expense and bureaucracy. Those who seek to challenge decisions so that they can access their rights struggle because appeal rights have been swept away, while legal aid has become a rarity in England and Wales. The Bill will leave even more people subject to poor Home Office decision-making but without the means or procedures to challenge that effectively.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the objective of Tory immigration Bills is to achieve two things: to stop people coming to this country, and to make life as miserable and difficult for the poor souls who have managed to make it here? Does my hon. Friend also agree that with this Bill they have triumphed in both respects?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend is spot on. So much of this is about immigration theatre; it is about the politics of immigration and being seen not to stand up to those who are anti-migrant—almost trying to be seen to be hard on immigration for electoral purposes. It is a disgrace.
Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. I want to take him back to the threshold figure of £18,600, because it is so unfair, so unequal and so unjust. That is not even the minimum wage, so it deliberately splits up families, depending on the wealth of one person in that family. The Supreme Court says it has a particularly harsh effect on citizens who have lived and worked abroad. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is cruelty and callousness at the heart of this Government’s policy?

Stuart C. McDonald: I absolutely agree. We could spend many hours debating, and highlighting the flaws of, so many of the features of the family migration rules. Another is the fact that this threshold only takes into account the earnings of the UK sponsor; it does not take into account, for example, the potential earnings of those who want to come and join their family members here. So these rules achieve absolutely nothing but keeping families apart—families split apart and destroyed.

Our asylum system also urgently needs important reform: to fix and extend the “move-on period” that forces newly recognised refugees into homelessness and poverty; to end the poverty support rates for asylum seekers and allow them the right to work; and to respect the vote in this House on the Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill to extend family reunion rights.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Does my hon. Friend agree that the fundamental point is that those under a certain age who have been designated as refugees should have the same rights as people over that age, and it is very nasty not to give those rights to children in particular?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and the UK is once more an outlier in terms of the refugee family reunion rules it has in place. Sadly, the Bill does not mention asylum at all, and gives us little chance to address those issues.

These and a million other things need to be fixed, but this Bill does not do that; instead, it provides the Government with a big blank cheque to extend many of these flawed features to hundreds of thousands more people, each and every year.

On EU nationals who are already here, although scrapping the fee for settled status is welcome, much more needs to be done. The Home Secretary says he is listening, but the biggest concern just now is what happens in the event of no deal. Unilateral promises from the Government are fine so far as they go, but promises can be here today and gone tomorrow and, being unilateral, they are no help to the UK in Europe, nor do they have the force of international law. That is why MP’s across the House have repeatedly urged the Government to seek to ring-fence the deal on citizen rights so that they can be guaranteed once and for all sooner rather than later. But the Government have shown absolutely no interest so far. We should use the Bill to try to make them at least attempt to secure such a deal, and we should use the Bill to enshrine the rights of the 3 million in primary legislation so that they cannot be changed in the blink of an eye via immigration rules.

Other questions remain. Why are there differences between the positions of EU citizens in a no-deal scenario compared with if a deal is agreed? Why are there to be settled status appeal rights if there is a deal, but not if there is no deal? Why are the appeal rights not in the Bill? Why are voting rights not protected? Why are the 3 million to be refused physical documentation despite calls from the Exiting the European Union Committee to make that available? Where is the clarity about rights for Surinder Singh cases, and the different rights of carers from Chen, Ibrahim and Teixeira case law?

Perhaps most significantly of all, we still do not know anything about what will happen to those who fail to apply for settled status in time. Why should there be such a severe cut-off date? It is inevitable that hundreds of thousands will not apply in time; many children; people who have been resident for many years; those who think having a permanent residence document is sufficient; people who struggle with language or technology; vulnerable and exploited people; people who were born here and do not think they need to apply—the list goes on. We must also remember that in a recent British Medical Association survey, 37% of EU national doctors were unaware of the scheme. That does not bode well.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: When Conservatives are on the stump or going around the country, they always talk about getting rid of red tape and taking the Government out of the centre of people’s lives. Right now, through this sort of legislation, they are putting massive amounts of red tape in people’s lives and putting Government right in the middle of people’s lives. Where things are currently going seamlessly, they want to introduce a ramping up of bureaucracy. That is shocking.

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; the Bill will catch hundreds of thousands of people into one of the most horrible bureaucracies that the Government have managed to create, and we should have absolutely nothing to do with it at all.

All the people—inevitably, hundreds of thousands of them—who fail to apply in time for the EU settled status scheme will be cast into the hostile environment, and that will make this a Windrush crisis writ large. The Bill creates that danger, but provides no clarity on, or protection from, the danger it creates.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does he appreciate that many of my constituents will be EU nationals whose partners are non-EU nationals, and that that causes double the uncertainty for those families, who now do not know what the position will be?

Stuart C. McDonald: That is a fair point. That is the Surinder Singh route, and we still need clarity from the Government about what happens to people in that position.

One part of UK immigration policy continues to work pretty well: free movement. I would hope that continuing free movement would answer many of the questions I have just posed, but the Bill seeks to ditch it. An end to free movement will make the UK poorer economically, socially and in terms of opportunity. Ending free movement means ripping up mutual rights to live, study, work and enjoy family life across Europe, depriving future generations of the extraordinary opportunities that ours have enjoyed.
Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Bill, apart from being appalling, is premature, given that we do not know what will happen in the Brexit debate? There may be a public vote; we might stay in the EU; we may have a Norway model; we may have free movement. Why are we prematurely legislating for a position in which we will not get free movement when we do not know the future?

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is spot on, and I shall come on to that point in a minute. It is premature, because it is tying Parliament’s hand on not just the future relationship, but the question of oversight of the future of the immigration system.

Free movement has been fantastic for people in this country and across the continent. As all the research shows, it has been good for our economy and for our public finances. That is true for Scotland and for the UK as a whole, and we will not support a Bill that brings those benefits to an end.

Drew Hendry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way yet again. He makes a point about free movement’s benefits to Scotland, and has it not been even more important for the highlands where, decade after decade, we have seen our population decline? Free movement has helped to arrest that situation and to turn it round to a point where we have a healthy population in the highlands, although we actually need more people there as well. Is it not the case that this is a “one size fits no one” policy as far as the highlands are concerned?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend is spot on, I will come to the particular importance of the free movement of people for Scotland in a little while.

The other advantage that retaining free movement brings is, as the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) said, that it opens up the possibility of different future relationships with the EU. The relationship that my party would prefer is, of course, continued EU membership, but the Prime Minister’s red line means that not only membership but other close relationships are not possible. If Parliament is serious about having a proper say on the future relationship, it should reject this Bill.

It is not only Parliament’s say on our future relationship with the EU that the Bill could diminish, but our say on the future immigration system. The Government launched their White Paper just a day before introducing this Bill. Their consultation has a year to run. Why would Parliament give the Government a blank cheque to introduce any system by subordinate legislation at this stage? We should be moving in the opposite direction; we need a totally different approach to how immigration laws are made. There have been thousands of changes to the immigration rules since 2010, but they are not noticed or understood, never mind debated, in this Chamber. There is no other public policy area in which such important changes attract so little scrutiny. Parliament must start getting involved in how we operate and design our immigration system.

The Bill is dominated by totally inappropriate Henry VIII clauses. This is about not only the incredible breadth of powers that are sought to change legislation, including primary legislation, simply because Ministers think that

that is appropriate, but even the type of statutory instrument procedures. Why are “made affirmative” clauses the order of the day?

It is especially important not to give the Government a blank cheque on future immigration policy, given what their White Paper tells us that they will do with such a blank cheque. There has been a lot of talk about division in the country, but at least the Government have brought a broad coalition together in opposition to many of their White Paper’s proposals. Business organisations, trade unions, universities, charities and non-governmental organisations are all hugely concerned. Extending the bureaucracy and huge expense of tier 2 to EU employees is understandably unpopular, even if some tweaking around the edges is proposed.

The proposed retention of the £30,000 financial threshold has sparked incredulity, as it would mean that 80% of EU workers coming to the UK would no longer qualify. Some 60% of jobs at the so-called intermediate level would not make the grade. Technicians in our universities, medical research charities and the NHS would struggle. Nurses, paramedics, junior doctors and social care workers will be implicated. Hugely significant sectors will find it impossible to adjust, including retail, food and drink, and hospitality. Housing and infrastructure targets will be totally unachievable. Such a financial threshold fails to recognise the need to recruit right up and down supply chains.

The proposals for stop-gap, temporary one-year workers’ visas are, frankly, totally unacceptable. The Government say, “You can come to work, but don’t bring your family.” You’ll have no recourse to public funds, and however well you do and however much your employer wants to retain you, you’ll need to leave again for at least another year.” That is an astonishing way to treat people, and such short-term schemes, under which people never develop support structures and have only a short period of employment to pay hefty recruitment and visa fees, are known to significantly increase the chances of exploitation. They are hopeless for integration—so they involve exactly the type of migration that the public are most frustrated about—and they are expensive for employers, who have to start again each year with a brand new recruit.

The White Paper is pretty much silent on the self-employed, which is again a matter of huge significance for certain industries in which self-employed contractors fill key roles. Universities have again criticised the failure to come up with anything approaching a sensible and competitive post-study work offer. If this is even roughly how the Government want to use the blank cheque provided by this immigration Bill, we should not be even remotely considering letting them near it.

Let me try once again to wake the Home Office up to the fact that this Bill, and the White Paper proposals that accompany it, would be a disaster for Scotland, both socially and economically. The White Paper proposals look set to result in an 85% reduction in the number of EEA workers coming to Scotland. Scottish Government modelling estimates that real GDP in Scotland will be around 6.2% lower by 2040 as a result of a Brexit-driven reduction in migration than it would have been otherwise. That is a fall of almost £6.8 billion a year in GDP by 2040, and a fall in Government revenue of £2 billion.

We need people to come, not additional hurdles to stop them coming.
Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he recognise the particular problems faced in the western highlands of Scotland, where there is a depopulation crisis? Urgent action is required, yet the Government have turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the needs of rural Scotland time and again. Even after an offer by Argyll and Bute Council to host a pilot scheme to test a regional immigration policy, they absolutely refused to do that. Will he join me in calling for the immediate devolution of immigration policy to the Scottish Parliament, because a “one size fits all” policy cannot and will not work for the whole UK?

Stuart C. McDonald: I am happy to support my hon. Friend in that call. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), he makes an important argument about rural Scotland.

If the Government were to succeed in reducing net migration to the tens of thousands, it is projected that Scotland’s working age population would decline by 4.5%, or 150,000, between 2016 and 2041. It is time that the Home Office engaged with these concerns. So far it has veered between platitudes about the useless Scottish shortage occupation list and total disinterest in the issue. I ask the Home Office: please, look at the analysis that has been done and proposals about how a differentiated or devolved system can work—not just from the Scottish Government but from academics such as Christina Boswell, Sarah Kyambi and Eve Hepburn. Look at what think-tanks such as the Institute for Public Policy Research are saying; see what works internationally in Canada, Australia and other countries.

Whatever our differing views on Scotland’s constitutional future, migration and demographics must be recognised as huge issues for the future of Scotland. The total lack of interest from the Home Office is just shocking. If it fails to start engaging and addressing the issue, there is no better illustration of why we need decisions on immigration to be in Scotland’s hands.

For all those reasons, the Bill must be refused a Second Reading. For such a short Bill, it risks remarkable damage. We will all be poorer if it passes. We say no to terminating our mutual rights to free movement and no to giving the Government a blank cheque to implement a disastrous alternative policy. We say no to extending the hostile environment and anti-family policies, and no to damaging Scotland’s future. For all those reasons, and all the reasons set out in the reasoned amendments tabled by the Greens and the Liberal Democrats, as well as that tabled by the SNP, the Bill must be refused a Second Reading.

6.18 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Each of our lives—all lives—is characterised by change and challenge. We attempt to rise to the second and cope with the first. How successful we are in that depends on context, individuals and circumstances. What is absolutely certain is that the familiar touchstones of enduring certainty, by accentuating what we know, affirm our personal sense of belonging and communal notion of identity.

In trying to build a society in which the things that unite us are greater than any which divide us, mass migration proves difficult simply because of its scale and the difference it makes. When communities quickly change beyond or nearly beyond recognition, people find it hard to cope. That was precisely why the people decided to say, as expressed through the referendum, that they wanted no more of free movement, and that was what the Home Secretary and shadow Home Secretary drew the House’s attention to. Of course, that was not the only thing that the referendum was about but, emblematically, what people saw as migration “out of control” became a proxy for not being able to command their own future and not being able to govern themselves.

Free movement has that problem at its heart. The idea that people can come here at will, regardless of need and of what they do when they get here, and can choose where they go and what their life is like thereafter, seemed to be at odds both with immigration policy before, which was based on applications, visas, needs and specificities of various kinds, and with what the people who are here already feel is fair and reasonable.

Pete Wishart: The right hon. Gentleman is correct that immigration was the cold beating heart of the case for leaving the European Union—there is no doubt about that. However, he is just making a traditional, right-wing Tory speech on immigration, saying that immigration somehow changes communities and drives down wages. Does he have even a shred of evidence to support all these lazy, right-wing Tory views about immigration? We have never seen any evidence.

Sir John Hayes: I do not mind being called a traditional Tory, but I am not so keen on “lazy”. If I am articulating that view and if it reflects a view that is held by many of my constituents and a large number of other people, I am doing the House a service.

Caroline Lucas: The right hon. Gentleman is correct that immigration was the cold beating heart of the case for leaving the European Union—there is no doubt about that. However, he is just making a traditional, right-wing Tory speech on immigration, saying that immigration somehow changes communities and drives down wages. Does he have even a shred of evidence to support all these lazy, right-wing Tory views about immigration? We have never seen any evidence.

Sir John Hayes: I will give way in a second.

Trevor Phillips, the founding chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, argued that there is a liberal consensus not to speak about such things. There is what he described—I do not know whether I am being unfair, but perhaps the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) matches this description—as “touchy”, “sneaky”, “complacent” and “squeamish” unwillingness on the part of bourgeois liberals to address the issue. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is a bourgeois liberal, but I do know that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) is, and I will happily give way to her.

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way with the customary courtesy that we all appreciate so much. I am not the fault of freedom of movement being out of control? Perhaps he would be doing his constituents more of a service if he based his arguments on evidence, and the evidence, time and again, is that freedom of movement does not reduce wages. We need a Government who are willing to enforce a minimum wage. I wish this Government would do that, but that is not the fault of freedom of movement.
Sir John Hayes: To be clear, I started this contribution by saying that change and challenge were part of every life. Change is inevitable and constant, and advanced societies of course have people coming and going to and from them. Indeed, that has been the case in our country for a long time, but the level and extent of net migration into this country over recent years have been unprecedented. If we look at the numbers, over the past 10 years, roughly speaking in net terms, 250,000 migrants have entered Britain each year.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Contrary to what the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) says, as a first-generation immigrant, I know that it is wholly inconsistent to say that immigrants have not changed this country or communities in any way whatsoever. Sometimes there is positive change, and sometimes there is negative change—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman shakes his head in disagreement, but I am merely repeating his words. Does my right hon. Friend agree there are both positive and negative changes, and that we want more of the positive and less of the negative?

Sir John Hayes: I do agree, and part of that is about scale. Part of that is about the absorption of new peoples, about building the kind of common sense of identity that I called for, and about ensuring that what we share is more important than that which divides us, as I also said a few moments ago. If we are to build that kind of social cohesion and that civil harmony, it is important to recognise, as my hon. Friend says, that physical and less so. Many communities across Britain felt at the time of the referendum—using that as an expression—that some of the changes were not positive. That is partly because free movement tended to bring people to particular communities in the east of England, including in my county of Lincolnshire, and other similar places, so that the number of people who came was not spread out evenly. People were often concentrated in small towns that changed very radically very rapidly, and it is the extent of that change that causes some of the concerns that I have attempted to amplify.

Brendan O’Hara: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that those of us in areas that have had a positive experience of immigration should continue to have the right to have that experience? Will he therefore back our call to devolve immigration to the Scottish Government so that we can continue to have that positive experience of immigration?

Sir John Hayes: I take the view that this is our sovereign Parliament, that Home Office policy should be made here, and that the Government govern for the whole of our kingdom. That may seem a bit unconventional to Scottish nationalist eyes, but it is certainly my view. As I recall, it was also the view of the majority of Scots when their opinion was tested in a referendum, so let us move on from the idea of devolving this policy.

As I said, the figures speak for themselves. There have been unprecedented levels of mass net migration for a decade. Of course, the fact that most of those migrants came from outside the EU goes back to the point made quite persuasively by the shadow Home Secretary, which is that this debate must be contextualised. We need to talk about migration as a whole, rather than simply immigration from the EU. Nevertheless, in the views of many, free movement became a totem for the kind of lack of control of our destiny and our borders that the EU embodies.

Stuart C. McDonald: What I did not do in my speech was to set out alternative ways of addressing some of the concerns that the right hon. Gentleman is raising, such as by investing in public services in communities where there has been migration and in integration strategies, and through proper labour market enforcement of standards and wages. Those are ways of addressing community concerns without the whole country having to cut off its nose to spite its face by ending the free movement of people.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is right that growing the population significantly creates great pressures on health, housing, roads and schools. He is right that public services struggle to respond to population growth of the kind that I have outlined, and it is time that we had what was described earlier as a grown-up debate about population growth, and its effect on the provision of public services and how they are funded.

However, the point that I really want to make is that the Government have only partly responded to that public call for tougher action. Returning to the figures that I quoted earlier when I challenged the Home Secretary, the number of failed asylum seekers removed from this country has fallen from 16,000 in 2005 to just 5,000—despite what the Home Secretary said, that figure does not include the returns of foreign criminals, although I understand that he made a genuine mistake in that respect—and the number of overstayers returned has dropped from 31,000 per annum to about 21,000 per annum. We are perpetually failing to deal with such matters as effectively and efficiently as we ought to, and that is actually rather unfair to the individuals concerned, because they sometimes end up in unacceptable conditions, whether in housing, in detention centres or wherever. It is actually fairer to deal with these things quickly, as previous Governments clearly did to a greater extent—I do not say that with any great relish.

It is also important to understand what this new White Paper is likely to lead to. There is a real risk that the focus on low-skilled migrants, and certainly on the one-year limit, may mask immigration figures. There is an argument for seasonal workers. The seasonal agricultural workers scheme is to be welcomed, and we should extend it to horticulture, but those workers tend to go home. They do not settle and they are not migrants; they are people who simply come to work.

Let us build an immigration system that is fair and that reflects public understanding of the need to build communities that cohere. And let us build a shared sense of Britishness; that should be at the heart of what the Government do.

6.30 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) made a wide-ranging speech, but I will address the narrower, more specific issue raised by the right hon. Member for Sutton
with no scrutiny or accountability, mistakes are inevitable. The Government told the 3 million EU citizens who are here:

“You are our friends, our neighbours, our colleagues. We want you to stay.”

The Government said that they only have to register, as they are existing residents. I do not doubt the Home Secretary’s sincerity on that, but it is, of course, exactly what was said to people of the Windrush generation. Everyone now acknowledges that terrible mistakes were made by the Home Office and that people who have been here for years were wrongfully detained as illegal immigrants.

If we are to subject 3 million EU citizens to our immigration system, it is right that we should now ask ourselves whether we have learned the lessons of the Windrush cases so that we do not repeat those injustices on EU citizens. We do not want the new level playing field to be a detention centre.

I have the privilege of chairing the Joint Committee on Human Rights and, following our inquiry into immigration detention, we are clear that two problems need to be addressed. The first is the lack of independence in decision making on detention, and the second is indefinite detention.

If a person is suspected of a crime, they cannot be detained by the Government; they can be detained only by the police, who are independent of Government. If the police want to continue to detain a person beyond 36 hours, they have to bring that person before a court, which is, of course, totally independent of Government.

But if the Home Office suspects a person of being in breach of our immigration laws, there is a complete absence of independence in the decision making. A civil servant—nameless, faceless and behind closed doors—just ticks a box to detain them. The first that person will know about it is when someone bangs on their door in the early hours of the morning to bundle them into an immigration enforcement van and take them to a detention centre.

With no independence in the decision making, and with no scrutiny or accountability, mistakes are inevitable. Those we get to hear about are probably only the tip of the iceberg, but we do know that £21 million was paid out by the Home Office in just five years to compensate for wrongful detention, and terrible mistakes are certainly what happened in the Windrush cases.

It is routinely said those people were unable to prove their residence here, which is not the case for the detainees we saw. We looked at their Home Office files, which the Home Secretary was good enough to release to them, and it was not that there was no evidence of their residence here. There were masses of it, including records of national insurance contributions going back to the 1970s. If there had been any independence in the decision making, these people would never have been detained, yet they were detained not once but twice. The papers in their files were ignored, and the pleas of their families were swept aside.

After the right to life, the right not to be unlawfully detained is one of the most important human rights. It should not be the case that a person has fewer protections from wrongful detention as an immigrant than they would if they had actually committed a crime. We should ensure that, in future, no one is detained unless the decision is taken independently. The Home Office should make its case, but someone independent must take the decision if a person is to be deprived of their liberty. The Joint Committee on Human Rights will table an amendment to that effect, and we hope the Government will agree to it.

Another deplorable aspect of our immigration system, to which EU citizens are now to be subject under this Bill, is that there is no time limit on detention. A person is taken from their home or workplace, and they have no idea whether they will be in the detention centre for a day, a month or a year. Evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights identified the indefinite nature of such detention as one of its cruelest aspects.

The criminal justice system imposes time limits at every stage, from first bringing a defendant before a magistrate to the sentence that sets out their time in prison, but the Home Office can hold a person in immigration detention indefinitely. The Joint Committee on Human Rights agreed with the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield and for Haltemprice and Howden, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and my right hon. Friend the Members for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) that there should be a time limit of 28 days on immigration detention, and the Joint Committee will table an amendment to the Bill so that if a detainee is not deported or released by then, they should be brought before a judge where the Home Office can apply for just a further 28 days. We hope the Government will accept an amendment on detention that I believe has widespread support in the House, including from the SNP—we have heard from the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) is a leading member of our Joint Committee—and the Lib Dems, and I know the DUP has long complained about indefinite detention.

This is not a party issue. It seems to be the Home Office versus everybody else. The Labour Government should have ended the scandal of indefinite detention when we were in office, but we did not, and I am now happy to apologise for that—it is something we should have done.

Geraint Davies: I support my right hon. and learned Friend’s amendment, and she may be interested to know that a Swansea resident, Otis from Congo, was ripped from his bed on the Thursday before Christmas and was due to be sent back to Congo, where he had previously been tortured, on Christmas Day. He was detained for 21 days and, luckily, following our intervention he is now safe and sound back in Swansea, but does it not show that, if the system is as we suppose it currently is, people who have a case, and who are in jeopardy if they are taken back, can be taken from their bed, kept indefinitely and then just carted away?
Ms Harman: I absolutely agree. For people who believe they have a good case, or who are here perfectly lawfully, it is a terrifying experience to be grabbed and swept away. That is not the sort of thing that should happen in this country.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Building on what the right hon. and learned Lady said, I formally indicate that the DUP will give serious consideration to what I think is a positive and worthwhile proposal that will be a step forward in affording constitutional norms, which we take for granted, to those who only want to live in this country and build a life alongside us.

Ms Harman: I am heartened by the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, and I hope he will join us when we take up the Home Secretary’s offer to go and talk to him about how we can make progress.

Caroline Lucas: The right hon. and learned Lady is making a powerful case. When I finally got into Yarl’s Wood, what came over to me from my conversations with the women I met is the mental torture, the arbitrariness, of not knowing why they had been taken. Although I respect that she is trying to get a majority for a particular timeframe, which is why she has chosen the 28 days, does she agree that, if we were not trying to make that compromise, there is an argument for ending indefinite detention altogether, without any timeframe?

Ms Harman: But the point is that it would not be indefinite—it would be finite. It would be for up to 28 days, and then with the possibility of a further 28 days—the cap would be there, with no more days after that. Perhaps I could talk to the hon. Lady about this further.

Here in the UK we pride ourselves on our commitment to human rights, so how is it that indefinite Home Office detention has been a feature of our system for so long? I suspect one reason is that immigration detention used to be used for a very small number of people—exceptional cases. In 1993, there were only 250 detention places, and for the most part many of them were not full. Now, 27,000 people are detained every year, with 7,000 of them for more than 28 days. I am very encouraged by the Home Secretary’s offer to meet us to discuss a way forward on this. I am grateful to the Immigration Minister for the evidence she gave to the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

Unaccountable, arbitrary, indefinite detention is a human rights abuse. It is a cruel anomaly in our system, and I hope the Government will use the opportunity of this Bill to end it. They will have then done something that the last Labour Government should have done and did not, as was rightly pointed out by my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary.

6.40 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), and I warmed to many of the points she was making. It is long overdue that we address the issue of indefinite detention.

I very much welcome this Bill as an important step in taking back control of our borders as we leave the EU. It is important that we deliver on this promise we made to the British people. Unfortunately, too many Members of this House seem to be reneging on promises they made to the British people at the last election. It is essential that we deliver on this promise to end the free movement of people and take back control of our own immigration policy. Beyond this Bill, which is just one step in that process, leaving the EU provides us with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reset our immigration policy.

As we do that, it is vital that we are able to have a grown-up, mature and constructive debate about immigration. We have to avoid the polarisation that too often takes place, where people are either labelled as being for free movement and immigration, or against it and seeing it as a bad thing, because the reality is that it can be both good and bad. It is clear to me that, on balance, immigration has been good for our country. It is a very positive thing for our country, and we have heard many hon. Members make the point about the benefits of immigration to our economy. It has also been good for our nation in the wider context and has largely contributed to our being the richly diverse nation that the UK is today. But we also need to acknowledge that for some communities immigration has been a needed blessing. If we do not listen to and acknowledge the legitimate concerns of communities who have seen the negative impacts of free movement affect them, we do the positive case for immigration a disservice.

There are some parts of our country and some communities where people feel that uncontrolled immigration has had a largely negative impact on their communities. It has brought about sudden change to the make-up, culture, nature and identity of those communities, and they see that as something that has been taken away from them. Although we should not be shy, as I have not been, in speaking up for the benefits that immigration has brought to our country, neither should we avoid addressing the challenges it has also created in some cases.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the public concerns about mass migration. In every poll taken, about 75% of people think immigration should be reduced and are concerned about the growth in population to 70 million over the next few years. Indeed, many think the Government should be going much further than reducing free movement and should be cutting immigration per se.

Steve Double: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention, as he makes the good point that many UK residents believe that migration has to be brought under control and that the numbers need to be reduced. In leaving the EU, we have that once-in-a-generation opportunity to reset our immigration policy and manage it in a way that is right for our nation.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend was talking about the benefits of immigration, and I could not agree more with him on that. Does he agree that the problem is not so much immigration, but administration? He rightly says that in many communities where there has been more immigration, public services have been put under strain. The Migration Advisory Committee report outlined that funding should have followed that level of migration. Does he see this as an opportunity for us, as if public money were to
follow the levels of immigration, it could benefit some areas that have had high levels of immigration and some that require immigration, such as certain areas in Scotland?

**Steve Double:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the point he makes, which was exactly the one I am coming on to. In being able to take back our own immigration policy, we are provided with the opportunity to manage it in a way whereby the Government can ensure that any of the impact of large numbers of people moving into different areas of our nation can be addressed by investment and finance being put in place to support the services. We will be able to manage the number of people coming into our country in a way that does not put that undue pressure on public services. Many of the negative impacts, sometimes perceived and sometimes real, can be handled in a much better way and, thus, we will be able to extol the virtues of the positive elements that immigration brings to our country while managing some of the negative perceptions that people have.

As I said, I very much welcome the Bill as a first step towards resetting our own immigration policy. I want to say a few words about the immigration White Paper that the Government produced, and I am glad to see the Immigration Minister on the Front Bench, because I am sure she will not be surprised at the points I am going to make, as I have made them to her many times. I do, however, want to put them on the record. There is much to be welcomed in the White Paper, in developing a fair system that no longer discriminates between where people come from, but assesses people on the basis of their abilities and what they will bring to our country. That absolutely should be welcomed. But as I have listened to businesses in Cornwall, I have heard about a number of elements of the White Paper that cause them concern, and I wish to highlight those here today.

We very much welcome the pilot scheme for seasonal agricultural workers. It is good that the Government acknowledge that this sector has a particular requirement for seasonal migrant workers that we need to make sure we are able to meet. The latest figures from the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly local enterprise partnership state that there are about 7,000 migrant workers working in our agriculture and food sector in Cornwall. Many farmers rely on migrant workers. My own father-in-law, who at the age of 89 is still farming on the Isles of Scilly, keeps making the point about how vital his seasonal workers from eastern Europe are to making sure he can pick his flowers and get them to market. It is vital for our farms that we continue to be able to meet that seasonal requirement for labour. The pilot scheme is therefore very much to be welcomed, as is the Government’s acknowledgement of the need of that sector.

The agriculture sector is not the only one that relies heavily on seasonal workers. In Cornwall, the tourism and hospitality sector, which is even bigger than our food and agricultural sector, has exactly the same requirement for seasonal workers from overseas. They are needed to come to man the hotels, bars, restaurants and the needs of tourists in Cornwall so that those businesses are able to continue to function and provide the services for the many, many thousands of tourists who come to Cornwall every year. So I urge the Government to look beyond the agricultural sector and to other sectors that have a particular requirement for seasonal workers. I welcome the steps that have sought to address this need through the 12-month low-skilled work visa, but I urge the Home Secretary and the Government to look at this again, because we clearly have a balance to strike here. At the moment, in this country, we do not have an army of people waiting to take up these jobs.

We have almost full employment, so there is a need to make sure that we have the workforce that our businesses, particularly those that require a heavily seasonal workforce, need. I am concerned that the 12-month low-skilled visa will put additional costs on businesses, in terms of the need both to keep recruiting staff every year and to keep retraining them every year. I am not convinced that it will help to meet the requirements of many of our businesses, so will the Government look again at what more we could do, particularly to help the tourism and hospitality sector?

Like others, I have concerns about the £30,000 threshold for skilled workers. A salary threshold is a fairly blunt instrument for identifying the skilled workers we need. That is particularly true in an area like Cornwall: when the average wage in the constituency that I represent is only around £18,000, that £30,000 threshold is unrealistic and will mean many people will be unable to come and work in businesses in Cornwall.

**Geraint Davies:** Does the hon. Gentleman accept that most graduates who come out of British universities cannot expect to earn £30,000 in their first year, although many can? The threshold is ridiculous.

**Steve Double:** I agree that the limit needs to be looked at, particularly on a regional basis, and ask the Government to consider whether we need regional variations to the threshold. A policy that works for the south-east of England almost certainly will not work for places such as Cornwall and other parts of the country where average wages are so much lower.

**Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con):** In the north of Scotland we have similar issues relating to hospitality, care, food and farming, but does my hon. Friend not agree that these issues are spread throughout the United Kingdom, and while the issues may be regional, we have to recognise that although London may have a higher salary level, the rest of the country may have a lower level?

**Steve Double:** My hon. Friend makes the point well. The Government do need to exercise some flexibility on this issue, particularly in respect of some of our public services, because we really do need workers to continue to come here. Particularly in health and care, that £30,000 limit is probably not going to meet the needs.

To sum up, I ask the Government to look into two things in respect of introducing a new immigration policy. First, we must ensure that we give enough notice and time for businesses to readjust to whatever the new regime is going to be. There must not be a sudden change and they should have plenty of time to plan, adjust and prepare for the change. Secondly, we really need to ensure that any policy is flexible enough to respond to the needs of our economy and to the different levels of employment in the country over a period of time. We must make sure that our policy responds to the
needs of the economy. I welcome the Bill and will support it as a first step, but we need to make sure that we take this opportunity to reset our immigration policy and get it right for the future.

6.53 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): This Bill is yet another power grab by a Government who are intent on riding roughshod over Parliament, and who view scrutiny as something to fear rather than a fundamental resource of democracy. Parliamentary scrutiny is there to enable a better, more effective, evidence-led approach, but it requires the appropriate powers to do that. The Bill does not allow Parliament to analyse, query and question the Government. Instead, it gives them sweeping powers to impose the immigration system that they set out in their White Paper or, indeed, any other whim that may take their fancy. We do not know what Home Office Ministers will do, and parliamentarians will be unable to challenge them when they do it. Having said that, we can have a good guess. Under the stewardship of a Prime Minister motivated more by ideology than facts, the Government have decided to stick with arbitrary targets and have looked to appease unjustified and unsubstantiated anti-migrant sentiment.

For Members from all parties, but particularly those on the Government Benches, I wish to outline a few key findings from the Government-commissioned Migration Advisory Committee report “EEA migration in the UK”. The report found no evidence that migration reduced wages, employment opportunities or training opportunities for UK-born citizens. Furthermore, it included strong evidence that EEA migrants have a positive impact on productivity, pay more in taxes than they receive in welfare benefits and consume in public services, and make a larger contribution to the NHS, in terms of both money and work, than they receive in health services.

As it stands, EEA nationals who want to come to the UK will be faced with our existing, creaking and failing immigration system, which is simply not fit for purpose. We know the damage that the Government’s hostile environment has caused for individuals and families throughout the country, and the Bill will push more people into this unjust position.

Geraint Davies: Is my hon. Friend aware of reports that have shown that on average migrants contribute 35% more in tax than they consume in public services? Will the new restrictions not mean higher taxes and lower services for the rest of us?

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank my hon. Friend for contributing to my previous statement.

The Bill will remove the rights of individuals and families without guaranteeing that sufficient rights are put in their place. If the Minister and the Government are serious about protecting people’s rights, will they put those rights in legislation?

I wish to raise a few other concerns. The first is the proposed £30,000 minimum salary threshold, which will also apply to migrants from the EU27. According to the 2018 annual survey of hours and earnings, the average earnings for a full-time male in the west midlands are £30,231, so just over the threshold. Meanwhile, the average earnings for a full-time woman are £24,030. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the inequities of a policy that would disproportionately impact women and shut them out of the possibility of coming into this country? Will he commit to conducting a comprehensive gender impact assessment of all policies in the white paper?

In the light of the plans for a salary threshold, my constituents are concerned that we will see staff shortages in our NHS and care sector worsen.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): My local hospital in Croydon already struggles to recruit nurses, and we have struggled to recruit social care workers. The arbitrary £30,000 has no correlation to the skills that we actually need in our economy. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill will get us nowhere and really should go back to the drawing board?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, on which I am about to expand. Staff shortages in our NHS and care sector will leave our loved ones waiting longer in hospital corridors to see a nurse. As my hon. Friend has just pointed out, we must ensure that we have nurses and care workers. We must ensure that our NHS and our care sector have the people that they need with the right level of skills. That is why I cannot support the Bill on Second Reading. Does the Secretary of State agree that equating pay and skill undermines the desire for an immigration system that, to quote the Prime Minister’s foreword to the December White Paper, “welcomes talent, hard work, and the skills we need”?

The second concern I wish to raise is about indefinite detention. As it stands, there are no limits on the length of time a person can be held in immigration detention in the United Kingdom. Anyone who has met those who have faced indefinite detention will know the pain and harm it causes. With the Bill potentially expanding the number of EEA nationals liable for detention, will the Government listen to the range of voices asking for an end to indefinite detention?

Finally, on the social security element of the Bill and the immigration White Paper, the latter proposes a more restrictive system for EU citizens’ entitlements, including longer waiting times before entitlement, so what guarantees will the Secretary of State give to protect EU citizens? With the EU likely to reciprocate any new restrictions on social security entitlement, what does he say to the more than 1 million UK citizens living in the EU who will have to face confines, or even become ineligible?

We in this House have a tendency to view issues as intrinsically good or bad, so I call on Members from all parties to reflect on a vital section of the MAC report that says that

“the impacts of migration often depend on other government policies and should not be seen in isolation from the wider context.”

I hope the Government heed that advice.

6.59 pm

Mrs Keni Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): I mentioned earlier in this debate that I was speaking as a first-generation immigrant. Immigration is an issue that is very close to my heart. My personal experience, especially through my immediate family and relatives, has been not from an EU perspective, but from a non-EU perspective. One good thing about the Bill is that we are no longer
Mrs Badenoch: In that case, nor will I take any lectures from Scottish National party Members. We can see from their sparkling racial diversity just how much they care about immigration. As someone who came to this country as a first-generation immigrant, I have seen at first hand both the positives and the negatives of immigration. There are not enough people who are willing to speak the truth on the subject.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Come and join us.

Mrs Badenoch: No, I am not interested in joining any nationalist party, but I thank the hon. Gentleman whose constituency I forget for inviting me to join. The fact is that if we are to have a calm debate about immigration, what we need are facts and figures, not smug self-righteousness, which is all that we get from those on the Opposition Benches.

I will continue on the topic of free movement, which is what this Bill is about. We all have different constituency experiences, which will have an impact on this discussion. I have had many positive discussions with Conservative Members. For instance, my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) talked about positive impacts in relation to immigration in his constituency. I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) talk about some of the difficulties that his constituency has had. We have both positive and negative experiences.

What creates the problem is when Members on the Opposition Benches, and perhaps some on these Benches, feel that only they have the best intentions and that anyone else who speaks with concerns is speaking from xenophobia and racism. That is absolutely wrong. We cannot think the very best of ourselves and the worst of anyone else who is not in our party, or who is not sitting on our side of the House. I am very, very willing, even as an immigrant, to hear arguments against immigration, because I know that immigration is a global issue. It is not a UK issue. Every single country in the world is talking about it. It is completely crazy for us to have this discussion as if it were a UK-only issue, or even an EU-only issue, and believe that no one else has the experience to be able to speak on it.

From the perspective of my constituency, immigration has, perhaps, an indirect effect. The north of my constituency has a huge biotech and pharmaceutical industry, and many of the arguments that people make there are very, very similar to those that have been made by SNP Members and by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and others, about the need to ensure that we continue to have a strong relationship with the EU—that is something that I support. Speaking as someone who was a former London Assembly member, I have also seen how immigration has an indirect effect on those of us outside London. My Essex constituency has seen a huge rise in house prices and house building, which is having an effect on its population in a very significant and profound way. It is not because loads of immigrants are coming to take on our jobs, but because lots of people who migrate to London raise prices and take up housing there, causing a push-out effect on other parts of the country, which we do not get the resources to deal with. As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), who is no longer in his place, we
We talk about going to France and to the Netherlands—people from this country are going to eastern Europe. People. Migration is not going two ways. Not enough villages in eastern Europe that are losing all their young and not to give back? We do not talk enough about is it fair, for instance, for us to absorb all the youth and more questions around migration. On free movement, would not be having this debate now. Perhaps if we had been able to resolve this issue, we have that that would necessarily solve the problem. W e ha ve that wa t would necessarily solve the problem. We have

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady talks about the UK’s one-size-fits-nobody migration policy. Like other countries such as Canada and Switzerland, does she support decentralising or devolving the issue, or is she still of the mindset that we must hold things centrally in London, and that London knows best?

Mrs Badenoch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, and I can see why he is making it. I am not someone who supports devolution, and I do not think that that would necessarily solve the problem. [Interruption.] I am talking about the devolution of this issue. We have a national border, so devolving national border issues to specific places will not solve the problem, but I take his point.

Social security co-ordination is another reason why I support the Bill. Those of us with long memories will remember that this very matter was one reason why former Prime Minister David Cameron went to the EU to seek a negotiated change to some of these things. Perhaps if we had been able to resolve this issue, we would not be having this debate now.

We can do better. We should be asking ourselves more questions around migration. On free movement, is it fair, for instance, for us to absorb all the youth and young people from southern Mediterranean countries and not to give back? We do not talk enough about brain drain, for example. We do not talk enough about villages in eastern Europe that are losing all their young people. Migration is not going two ways. Not enough people from this country are going to eastern Europe. We talk about going to France and to the Netherlands—

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con) rose—

Mrs Badenoch: I will give way to my hon. Friend.

David Duguid: On that point, my hon. Friend talks about the brain drain from eastern European countries to here, but does she not also recognise that the economies of many of those countries are improving to the point that people from those countries no longer wish to come to the UK? They want to stay at home and develop their careers there, which is why we need this Bill to extend our reach beyond the EU.

Mrs Badenoch: My hon. Friend is right. There is no one-size-fits-all picture. There are lots of different things happening in lots of different places, and piecing together the pieces of this complex picture will give us the solution.

Sir Edward Davey: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Badenoch: I am afraid that I cannot take any more interventions because I am running out of time.

We can and should do better. We need a moral migration policy that is right for everyone—not just the migrants coming in, but those going out. We should also be looking at the polling numbers. It is not a coincidence that attitudes towards migration are more positive than they have been for a very long time, and that is because we are tackling people’s concerns not about immigration, but about uncontrolled, open-borders immigration. It is difficult to control free movement, but people want to see more control. It is not a coincidence that now that we are tackling the issue, we are seeing concerns about migration fall. That is why I am very happy to support this Bill.

Anna Soubry: Can we just make it very clear that we do control our borders? The last time that I went overseas on holiday, I had to show my passport and so did everybody else.

Mrs Badenoch: Perhaps I was a bit too loose with my words. I am not saying that there is no control whatever, but that people want more control and do not feel that free movement is enough control.

7.11 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch), who gave an impassioned and well-delivered speech, almost all of which I disagreed with.

This Bill has taken its time to arrive. And now that it is before us, it is a disaster waiting to happen. Right the way through, it is based on an assumption made by the Prime Minister in her Lancaster House speech that what 17 million people meant when they voted leave was that we needed to end freedom of movement, not just for EU citizens in the UK, but for UK citizens throughout the European Union. I am 100% certain that 100% of the 52% did not mean that, but the Government’s assumption that they did is essentially why the red lines set by the Prime Minister have left the Government in a position where they are incapable of delivering any form of Brexit that does not wreck the British economy. If the Prime Minister wanted more time to reconsider her position, reconsidering those red lines would be the wisest thing she could do. If she then reached across to the other side the Chamber, she might well find reasonable people on the Opposition Benches who are prepared to listen to her.

The Bill abandons freedom of movement. With a slash of a pen, the rights of people in this country will be drastically reduced. British people, young and old, will lose the right to travel freely, to study overseas, to make friendships in other countries and to build careers. I am afraid that the Minister and the Home Secretary are both young enough to live long enough to have history judge them very harshly for this Bill, and they
[Tim Farron]

should be warned in advance. There are people who have made their homes here, and 3 million of our neighbours and colleagues are being told, not very subtly, that they are not wanted here. Britain is surely much better than this.

Alex Sobel: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that EU citizens living here who are trying to get settled status and do not have access to a computer can only apply on an Android phone? The Government cannot even make their software available for iPhones, which many people use. How can this give us any confidence for a future immigration system for EU citizens?

Tim Farron: I am deeply worried about that. The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point that I am just coming to. The settled status scheme has been rolled out just this month, and with it has come the grotesque sight of families who have built their lives in the UK being forced to register just to carry on with their lives as normal. As the hon. Gentleman has just stated, every glitch in the technology—every moment that the computer says no—will have a devastating effect on people who should feel welcome here. Research estimates that one in 10 EU citizens could fall between the gaps and never be registered at all. People will get the wrong status as a result, which means more problems for them and massive problems for the Home Office years down the line. Mark my word: this is the beginning of a Windrush mark 2.

What will replace freedom of movement? Well, this Bill does not even really tell us. We have to guess, and businesses will have to guess. The Bill is silent on the very issue on which it is supposed to be legislating. It just extends powers to future Governments to do as they please—any future Government with any intentions, without any security or scrutiny from this House. Are we really supposed to trust the Home Office, no matter its future leadership, to do whatever it pleases on this vital matter—the very Department that brought us the Windrush scandal, with British citizens kicked out of their jobs and homes, and even locked up in detention cells, and that brought us the hostile environment of harassing immigrants in their homes, workplaces and even when they went to their local A&E?

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman, with typical straightforwardness, is making a case for the perpetuation of free movement. He believes in freedom of movement from the European Union, but presumably he does not believe in freedom of movement from New Zealand, Canada, Australia or the West Indies, which he has just spoken about. What is it about Europe that is different from those countries that have such historic ties with the United Kingdom?

Tim Farron: The right hon. Gentleman does not believe in freedom of movement of any kind whatever. I assume that he is a free-market Conservative. If he believes in the free movement of capital—in fact, if he believes in the free market at all—not to support the free movement of the people who are the backbone of any free market is absolutely ludicrous and does not stack up.

There is nothing in this Bill about Britain’s proud record as a humanitarian leader—nothing on helping people who have been persecuted around the world for who they are, what they believe in or who they love. I would have thought that the Home Office wanted to talk about how Britain is at its best when it looks after people who come to us, ask for our help and seek safety and sanctuary. I remain deeply affected and humbled by meeting parents in refugee camps who took appalling risks to shield their children from horrific danger. Many other Members have seen the same terrible sights, and we know what it means to those people to know that Britain is a safe haven. Yet the Bill is totally silent on this matter. Perhaps the Government do not want much scrutiny of their record on refugees.

Let me tell the House what this Bill could do if it were to follow Britain’s proud humanitarian tradition. It could let people work. At the moment, asylum seekers are barred from working. They cannot even earn to take care of their own families, and that makes it harder to integrate and harder to play a part in their own communities and economies—the very things that help every community to thrive. Let us fix this. If asylum seekers do not get a decision after three months, let us lift this ludicrous ban, and let them work and contribute. The Chancellor might be more interested than the Minister, given that this would bring a net gain to the economy of around £40 million every year. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), whose Asylum Seekers (Permission to Work) Bill, which is before the House, calls for exactly that.

The Government’s Bill could also ensure that we do not lock people up indefinitely, as has already been mentioned by one or two right hon. and hon. Members. At the moment, immigrants can be detained with no idea of when they might be removed or released. This is unacceptable, unjust and un-British. At the very least, let us set a 28-day deadline on how long someone can be detained.

This Bill could also make sure that families are united, not separated. I have a private Member’s Bill, the Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill, before this House that would reunite refugee children with their parents. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who is sitting in front of me, also has a Bill—the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill—which has the same aim, but has a greater chance of getting passed. Why have the Government not accepted the proposal offered by either of us?

The failures of this Bill affect the local as well as the global. Last week, this House celebrated, with great gusto, Cumbria Day—a proud day for us all. But it masks a reality, which is that people in my constituency earn roughly £20,000 pounds a year on average. Yet last year’s immigration White Paper suggests that we ban all migrants who earn less than £30,000 because apparently they will not have sufficient skills. The Government say that this would not have an impact on areas such as mine, but they have refused to say how they reached this conclusion, so let me attempt to draw the Government back into the real world, if that is possible.

The hospitality and tourism industry in Cumbria employs more than 60,000 people. It contributes £3 billion to the economy every year. It contains the Lake district and much of the Yorkshire dales. Outside London, we
are Britain’s most popular tourist destination. About 10,000 of this vital industry’s workers in Cumbria are from outside the UK. My constituency has low wages, and it is a disgrace that over 2,000 local children are living in poverty, but it has only 270 people registered as unemployed. There is no untapped pool of local labour waiting to fill the thousands of vacancies this Government will force on our industry. It does not take a genius to work out that if we stop people working in the UK if they are on less than 30 grand, if the average wage in tourism is nowhere near that and if the local workforce is not big enough, we will damage, if not destroy, that industry by imposing these restrictions. It does not take a genius to work that out, which is quite useful given that this Government are singularly lacking in genius.

This Bill is heartless, but more than that, it is witless. We will oppose the Bill tonight. It is an awful Bill, which makes it all the more stunning that Labour’s Front Benchers will not oppose it.

7.20 pm

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). Indeed, I will be following him into the No Lobby this evening, because I, too, will be voting against this Bill.

It is a funny old world when—

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

Anna Soubry: No, no—I have only just begun. I will give way in a moment.

It is a funny old world that we live in when, faced with this Bill, Her Majesty’s Opposition—the Labour party—find themselves in the bizarre and, I would argue, appalling position of abstaining on it. What shame they bring on a formerly great party.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I want to give the right hon. Lady some breaking news: apparently Labour has U-turned on its abstention and is now going to oppose the Bill. Is that right?

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Wait and see.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My goodness, we have breaking news in the Chamber: “Wait and see.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that he addresses his remarks through the Chair, not directly to the Front Bench.

Anna Soubry: I am not going to reply to the hon. Gentleman’s intervention because there is nothing for me to reply to, but I am sure we will all be enlightened later.

This is a very serious matter. I object to this Bill, and I will not be voting for it. First, I happen to believe in the free movement of people, and I have yet to hear anybody advance a single argument why the free movement of people has been anything other than good for this country—not one solid argument advanced. Secondly, the Bill does not provide the surety to EU citizens already living in this country that it should. Thirdly—many would say that this is the most important point and main failing of the Bill—it contains Henry VIII powers giving unbelievable, and simply unacceptable, powers and measures to Ministers.

I want to nail a few lies, not told in this place but put about in common parlance. We are told that in June 2016 the will of the people was to reject the free movement of people. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) nods, but that is not true. Of those eligible to vote, 73% voted for us to leave the European Union. Even with my poor maths, I can see that 63% of the people of this country—in other words, the will of the people—was actually for us not to leave the European Union and not for us to abandon free movement. Those are the facts. That is the will of the people—the 63% who we never hear about. Ever since that referendum, we have had put about almost a tyranny of mistruths and myths. It is a shame on every politician that nobody has ever really stood up and spoken the truth of this matter. The majority of people in this country did not vote to leave the European Union, and they did not vote to end free movement. In any event, although 52% of those eligible to vote did vote for us to leave the European Union, one cannot extrapolate from that, on the basis of no evidence at all, that immigration was the overriding feature that led them to do so. In my constituency—the vote that was recorded was actually for the borough, which is larger than the constituency—we reckon that about 52% of those who voted did vote for us to leave.

Certainly in Bromsgrove, and I think across the rest of the country, people voted for a variety of reasons. It is true that immigration played an important part. I think that one of the darkest moments in this nation’s history was when Nigel Farage stood up in front of a poster that showed a long line of people who had certain features in common. First, they were mainly men. Secondly, they were fleeing war, rape and terror, seeking refuge in a safe place. Oh yes, they all had brown faces as well, quite remarkably. The other feature of that long line of people, who had the headline above them, “Breaking point”—we all know what the dog whistle was in that headline—was that it had absolutely nothing to do with our membership of the European Union, if for no other reason than that we are of course not a member of Schengen.

Make no mistake about it: fears were undoubtedly fuelled and prejudices were undoubtedly preyed on by the leave campaign wrongly to make a phoney case to the people of this country that somehow by our leaving the European Union there would be a dramatic decrease in the number of migrants in our country. It was a great lie; a great con. The overwhelming majority of people who come to this country come here to work—they are givers, not takers. Therefore, if we want to reduce immigration, there is a very good way to do it—we trash the economy. We make sure that there are fewer jobs for these people to come to our country to fill. [Interruption.] Ah, Brexit, of course: whichever way we cut it, it will mean that our economic prosperity and the number of jobs available will be reduced. Perhaps that is actually the cunning plan.

I get irate with and frankly appalled by Conservative Members who should know better, because the truth and reality is, as I say, that people come here to work. What are hon. Members actually saying when they say, “Reduce the number of migrants.”? Send them home: is
that what they are saying? No, of course not, because we need these people to work, not just in the fields of Lincolnshire, in our care homes or in our NHS, but throughout every stratum of industry in every piece of our economy. We need these people. As the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) reminded us, this is a two-way process, because people in our country—my children and the grandchildren I hope to have—benefit, or would have benefited, from the free movement of people, but our country has benefited from immigration for centuries. I am saddened to the bottom of my boots that for so long we have never made the positive case for immigration in our country. Not surprisingly, we have found ourselves in the situation that we are in, where mythology, rhetoric, misinformation and downright lies have been spread by all manner of people to support their own ideological, short-term vision, with absolutely no foundation and at a real cost for our country and its future.

I am appalled and ashamed when I meet people with brown skins who were born and bred in this country—probably some of them more British than I am, because my great-grandfather was an immigrant—and who tell me that since the referendum they have been pointed at by people and asked, “Why haven’t you gone home?” I met one such constituent only the other week, who, when someone said that, turned round and said, “Well, actually I am on my way home, to Nuthall,” which is a place in my constituency. How many of us have heard from friends, from our constituents or from people we just come across with Polish or Slovakian accents who have been asked, “Why are you still here?” or have been spat at on public transport? This is not a country that I feel proud to be a member of. I take the view that this is not our country. I also take the view that the majority of people in this country are good and they are tolerant, but too many of them have been told these lies.

It is now absolutely up to each and every one of us to stand up and make the case for immigration and to tell the truth about immigration. As I say, it is not just about the huge positive benefits for our economy. I think the last Treasury analysis showed something in the region of £4 billion extra going into the Treasury coffers—but it is for the culture of this country as well.

It is funny when people talk to their MP about immigration and say, “We’ve got too many of these immigrants,” and we say, “Do you mean the people running the Chinese takeaway, who have been here for decades?” and they say, “Oh no, not them.” We say, “Well, what about the people of Asian origin who are running the corner shop?” and they say, “Oh no, not them”. When we have that discussion and debate with them, we can make the case, because we are inherently a good and tolerant people.

As we have seen in many parts of our country, in any circumstances where there is a sudden influx of people—I am not being rude or disparaging about students—whether it is students or migrant workers, if we do not get the resources right, there will be people who are somewhat pickled off. But that is not a problem of immigration; it is a failure of this place and of local authorities, because it is a failure of resources. Most importantly, it is a failure of people to stand up to dog-whistle politics. I say to my party: if we pass measures like this Bill, the people of this country in time will not forgive us, because this party will become totally unelectable—and rightly so.

7.30 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who said so much that I agree with.

The Secretary of State said earlier that immigration was the issue of the referendum and that we must have a fair system. I agree that we must have a fair system, although I dispute the premise of the first part of his statement. I believe that our immigration system should be based on rules that are grounded in human rights; that value the contribution of migrants and allow them all to work, including asylum seekers; that do not put desperate people in desperate conditions; that are operated by well-trained, skilled and adequately resourced staff; that give a warm welcome to those fleeing war and persecution; and that show those who have already made their homes here that they are still properly and warmly welcome. We need a system that values our European neighbours—not with platitudes, but with a real practical understanding of the nature of their lives.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Thangam Debbonaire: I am aware of the time limit, so I am afraid I will not give way.

This immigration system’s design should have learned and inwardly digested the lessons from the Windrush system. It should have involved the nation—leavers and remainers, those concerned about immigration and those concerned that it treats neither long-term legal migrants nor newly arrived people fleeing persecution well—in discussing what a new immigration policy should be and how it should operate. I want that system, and this is not that.

There is a real risk that we are putting people who have legally made their lives here through an undignified, barely tested process of applying for the right to remain here—people who have contributed to their communities, raised children, worked hard, paid taxes and helped their neighbours. This is in the wake of an immigration scandal in which other people who had legally made their lives here, contributed to their communities, raised children, worked hard, paid taxes and helped their neighbours were made to feel unwelcome and told to go home. Some lost their jobs or homes and suffered great hardship. Forms were lost, time and money were lost, and hearts that felt British were truly broken.

A constituent of mine whose life has been here for decades but was born in another EU country said to me at the time of Windrush, “We, the EU 3 million, are going to be the next Windrush generation.” There is no sign in this Bill or the White Paper that the lessons of that scandal have been learned and that my constituent can be reassured. The Home Office, which my staff and I deal with daily on behalf of constituents, has many compassionate staff, but it is already struggling. It is buckling under the strain, and we propose to add 3 million more people to the system.
The Home Secretary says that this is the start of a national conversation about our immigration system. The start should have been years ago. As the result of the EU referendum was so many times been identified as closely tied with concerns about immigration, surely this conversation should have started in 2016. If not then, why not in 2017 or perhaps 2018? We should have talked about this in more depth than simply trotting out platitudes about valuing people who have made their home here, when so much pain has been caused to so many who have made their homes here.

There should have been honesty about the mutual benefits of reciprocal movement of people who live, work and study across the EU—I declare an interest: one of those is my husband. There should be honesty, not lies, which is what we were fed during the referendum campaign. We should discuss how we want to welcome people, who we want to welcome and why, and we should do that in a way that is informed by our country’s history, our way of life and our knowledge that those two things have always been intertwined with migration.

We should talk about the consequences of migration policy for jobs and for our care homes, universities, creative arts, aerospace sector and tech, digital and IT companies. We should have been discussing this as a country. This Bill should have been introduced in the concluding stages, not the starting stages, of a national debate.

When people’s worries about immigration—whatever their motivations—are not dealt with, there are serious consequences. People who think that there should be more controls grow resentful if they feel their concerns are ignored, and they feel alienated from a political system that they rightly think should serve them. They may feel that they are labelled as racists, which they may also feel is unfair, and that does not help their feeling of alienation. This is a context in which the far right benefits. It is not a context in which good immigration policy is created.

My constituents in Bristol West often write to me about migration. They never tell me to help refugees or Windrush victims or EU citizens less. They tell me to fight harder, and I always will, but they also do not feel that the system is working. They campaign to stop indefinite detention of migrants. They campaign to keep all EU citizens not just here, but here and welcomed. They are losing trust in our system. Nobody is satisfied except the far right, who see opportunity in the frustrations of those who feel that the system is not working for them.

Reasonable people, including the Immigration Minister and the Home Secretary, would agree that if we were fleeing war or persecution in this country, we would expect a safe welcome in another. We would probably go to the nearest country, but we would understand that it might need to run a programme of resettlement to a third country if numbers were large. We would hope not to be put in such dire circumstances that we felt forced to leave the first safe country, as so many people do from countries around the Mediterranean to flee to us, a country that people see as a sanctuary—something we should be proud of.

If that country could not or would not help us or left us unable to live, work or provide for our families—the circumstances that so many people in Libya and other countries find themselves in—we might also be so tempted. We would not expect to be put in substandard, unsafe accommodation paid for by the taxpayer or be prevented from getting a job. We would expect to contribute. We would not feel it was right that we were kept on a subsistence allowance, yet left with the blame for a system that is rooking the taxpayers as well as not serving us.

Our asylum system is flawed. In a report published in 2017, the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, which I chair, put forward many recommendations that I beseech the Home Secretary and Immigration Minister to look at again. We should end indefinite detention, and I am glad to hear vocal cross-party support for ending it, which I hope the Government will take heed of.

This Bill could have dealt with all these issues, but it barely touches the surface. The Bill fails. It fails to provide a route for planning a fair, efficient, good-value, humane and caring system that those who voted leave and those who voted remain can believe in. It could have provided the framework for an immigration system that we could all put our trust in, but it does not. Instead, it creates huge powers but provides no clarity. The White Paper could have given that clarity, but it does not. It misses by a mile the vision and values that our country’s immigration system should have been built on—British values of tolerance, openness and fair-mindedness.

This Bill could have been the nourishing meal that gave us what we needed to get through the economic woes of Brexit, which I still hope we will not have to suffer. Nobody will be satisfied. Everybody will cry for more. I would despair, but I want to keep hope that the Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister will reflect on what has been said around the House today and seek to amend the Bill themselves. Leave voters deserve better, remain voters deserve better, and our country deserves better.

7.39 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As I have said on more than one occasion, we have already had a people’s vote and the people voted to leave the EU. My constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South were particularly clear when they voted by 70% to leave. One of the key reasons for doing so was a desire to take back control of our own borders.

Last year, Parliament passed the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, under which the same rules and laws apply on the day after we leave the EU. That currently includes the EU’s rules on free movement, and Parliament must legislate to bring free movement to an end. Without this Bill, the EU’s free movement rules would continue to have effect after we leave. Were that to happen, it would be completely unacceptable and we would have failed to address our constituents’ legitimate concerns about EU immigration. We need to pass this Bill to deliver the firm but fair and efficient system that my constituents want, regaining control of our own borders.

Anna Soubry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jack Brereton: No. I have to make some progress.

I know from the many conversations I have had with my constituents on the doorstep that a significant number voted to leave primarily to take back control of our borders and to secure the chance to reform our immigration system. People in regional towns and cities felt that Brussels was far too remote and technocratic to realise
the practical local consequences of continent-wide free movement, especially the impact of increased pressures on local services, school places and housing. That was squared against a feeling that the EU had delivered very few beneficial improvements in local residents’ quality of life, particularly outside the M25.

There has been a feeling that my constituents were not allowed to talk about their genuine concern about the impacts of immigration and that, if they did talk about it, they would be ignored, pilloried or shunned. They certainly do not feel there is anything wrong in believing, given our unique history with Ireland, that Irish citizens should enjoy more rights here than, say, citizens from south-east Europe. People voted to end free movement for EU citizens outside the common travel area because it did not work for them and they wanted to regain control.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jack Brereton: No. I want to make some progress.

Freedom of movement did not result in tangible improvements to my constituents’ own quality of life and future prospects, even as it improved the quality of life and future prospects of those who found themselves entitled to move freely here. Free movement in practice worked instead as a mop for clearing up the EU’s chronic unemployment problem, suppressing wages here in exactly the kind of communities that I and other hon. Members were elected to represent.

Sir John Hayes: The chairman of the Migration Advisory Committee has made exactly that point—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): He didn’t.

Sir John Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman listen? The chairman made exactly that point. He said that the policy of free movement tends to perpetuate a low-skill, low-wage economy. That is precisely what we have ended up with, with a consequent displacement of investment in skills, in automation, in technology and in recruitment.


Certainly, Stoke-on-Trent South has some of the lowest average wage levels in the country, and we need to continue to build on the work we have been doing in government to ensure people take home more.

Anna Soubry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jack Brereton: No, I am making some progress.

My constituents want London-based policy makers to focus on doing what it takes, across every nation and region of the United Kingdom, to prioritise the employment and lifelong employability of the British people. Of course, where there are clear and urgent shortages of British candidates, such as in our NHS, rightly migrant workers can add skills to our economy and make a significant contribution. It is positive to see the caps for non-EU migrants coming to work in the NHS lifted. The Home Office has always been clear that the future immigration system will be based on engagement and evidence, and that by putting the skills and talents of migrant workers at the heart of the future system, the UK can continue to attract the brightest and the best from across the world when it is necessary for us so to do.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman talks about skills, but in fact, with salary thresholds, we are talking not about skills but about salaries, and the two things do not connect, particularly where wages are far lower—outside the south-east. A skilled or university-qualified person in Scotland can easily earn under £30,000, which is the threshold that has been set.

Jack Brereton: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. Although I do not totally agree with what she has said, some parts of the country, including my own—

Carol Monaghan: It’s a fact.

Jack Brereton: Will the hon. Lady let me finish my response? Some parts of the country, and certainly my own, do see differential wage levels, and having lower skills certainly does have an impact on that.

We need to ensure that there is more of a commitment in the longer term that any such shortages will be addressed by properly equipping the British people for such roles, particularly in traditional, proud manufacturing employment. This is exactly what our industrial strategy is designed to address, and we need the right immigration and social security co-ordination to work alongside it. Delivering on that rebalancing of our economy will be hugely important in ensuring that traditional working-class communities, as in Stoke-on-Trent and across the country, are no longer ignored.

Anna Soubry: Could my hon. Friend tell us what percentage of people in Stoke are migrant workers and, when free movement from the European Union ends, which countries people will come from to replace those EU workers? Will they come from Bangladesh, and is that what his constituents voted for?

Jack Brereton: I think what we in this House are saying is that we want to regain control and ensure that we have a fair system, whereby anybody coming to this country is in the same system and is judged on merit, not on which country they come from. At the moment, the current system is not a fair one. It prioritises some European countries within the EU, and places such as the Commonwealth, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and America are not receiving the same priority.

If we do not deliver immigration reforms as we take back control through Brexit, there is a real danger that some people will, in exasperation, turn to those who have demonstrably exploited their grievances before. It is concerning that we see a rise of extremist views, stirred by populists on both the far left and the far right. As I have stressed in the House previously, it was not easy to see off the British National party in Stoke-on-Trent, as we have had to do, and I will not be cavalier in assuming that the threat has gone away. We must ensure that our democracy remains relevant and responsive to all our communities if we are to see off future extremist threats.
Ending free movement is a major change in our immigration law. It is a change that people voted for and we must deliver it, just as we must deliver Brexit itself. Inevitably, given the scale of the task enabled by this Bill, much of the delivery will take the form of consequential amendments to be made by secondary legislation. It is work that must be done. The Bill contains the necessary powers to get the process under way, and I will very happily support it tonight.

7.47 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I was only going to make a couple of points, but as I have listened to the debate, the number of points has grown. I shall kick off by correcting, or perhaps taking on—I do this on migration quite a lot—the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch). I was very disappointed by the remarks of the hon. Lady, who is not in her place, and the sort of reverse dog whistle when she looked at the SNP Benches. She should be aware that the first ethnic minority Member of the Scottish Parliament was Bashir Ahmad of the SNP, that the first Government Minister in the devolved Scottish Government was Humza Yousaf of the SNP, and that the first Muslim woman from Scotland to be an MP was Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh of the SNP. I merely put that on record so that people such as the hon. Member for Saffron Walden do not repeat that sort of nonsense again.

This immigration debate is an interesting one. It is not a debate about what we want or what we could do; it is a debate about what we can stop, what we can control and what we can limit, and that is very disappointing. There is actually something really akin to the Soviet central planning of the 1920s onwards: we have Soviet tractor statistics. That is really the sort of nonsense again.

The Bill is based on Soviet-style central planning and a desire for tractor statistics, but it does not take account of what we really need. I have raised one of the most important points with the Home Office time and again. It is said that we are in control and we do not have free movement, but if we need people to come and work on fishing boats—people from outside the European Union want to come here, their Governments want them to come, our local authority wants them to come, fishing organisations want them to come and our communities want them to come; indeed, everybody wants them to come except somebody in an office in London—we are told it cannot happen. The Home Office in London says no, and boats are tied up.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend's point stands for itself and is well made. As we are dealing with further voodoo from the Home Office, let me say that the problems that we have at present are based on voodoo thinking. Part of it was “Take back control”, but when we are dealing with the Home Office, no one is in control, least of all the Home Office itself.

The Bill is based on Soviet-style central planning and a desire for tractor statistics, but it does not take account of what we really need. I have raised one of the most important points with the Home Office time and again. It is said that we are in control and we do not have free movement, but if we need people to come and work on fishing boats—people from outside the European Union want to come here, their Governments want them to come, our local authority wants them to come, fishing organisations want them to come and our communities want them to come; indeed, everybody wants them to come except somebody in an office in London—we are told it cannot happen. The Home Office in London says no, and boats are tied up.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman’s constituency, like mine, depends a lot on EU immigrants. In my constituency it is in the education and health sectors, and he has mentioned fisheries. Does he agree that the Home Office needs to think about allowing people who come here as asylum seekers to work earlier and to make a contribution to the economy, rather than robbing them of their dignity?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: That is correct, and the point has been well made by many MPs. If it was not for the voodoo thinking of the Home Office, and if normal people were allowed to decide this, that would be happening, to everyone’s benefit.

I introduced a private Member’s Bill on refugees, and I would have thought that this Bill would be an opportunity for the Home Office to extend the same rights to people who have already been given refugee status and are under the age of 18 as it does to those over the age of 18. Again, we have voodoo arguments and nonsense thinking from the Home Office about why it should not do this. There is an opportunity. The Home Office could end the need for my Bill if it wanted to, and it is disappointing that it does not.
[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

We are happy in Scotland, but we need more people. Switzerland has 26 cantons. Half the visas of people going into Switzerland are divided between the 26 cantons, and the other half are centrally controlled in Berne. Switzerland can manage to do that, but the UK cannot, because of voodoo thinking and a desire to keep control where the Home Office does not need control, thereby creating problems and messing up people’s lives unnecessarily. That is our lot, given that we are stuck with the Home Office as it is.

Migration is good. I will repeat that for anyone who is in any doubt: migration is good. I live on a small island in the Outer Hebrides and our construction industry is just about driven personally by a guy called Pawel Kochanowicz. He is a young man who came to live on Barra, and he works day in and day out. Such people are welcome, and the more like him, the better.

Stephen Kerr: After 12 years of an SNP Government in Scotland, and when other parts of the United Kingdom have a net increase in immigrant population, why is it that Scotland’s population does not really move?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: If the hon. Gentleman looks at the part of the UK that became independent 96 years ago, he will see it now enjoys five to six times greater growth. When a country controls all the levers of the economy, it finds that things improve. If a country is scared of responsibility and outsources it to someone else, it should not be surprised if its economy is in reverse. If the hon. Gentleman wants to take control of his life, he should follow the SNP’s route, as the example is there of Ireland, of Iceland, of Norway and of many other countries. What is he scared of? He is scared; that is his problem. He uses migration to make cheap political points on the back of mismanagement by the Home Office and the Government in London—he should be ashamed of himself. I am grateful to him for giving me that row; I particularly enjoyed it.

There are many benefits to migration, and it goes both ways. I have cousins who live in New Zealand. I have Maclean cousins in Cape Breton in Nova Scotia and MacNeil relatives in Vancouver. We have all benefited from the movement of people and, if they are watching, I say a quick hello to them. It is great to use the House of Commons for that opportunity.

My relatives have contributed to New Zealand, Canada and many other places. Other people have helped our country—I gave the example of Pawel Kochanowicz from Poland. The hon. Gentleman’s colleague, the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), made a more sensible intervention earlier when he said that the problem was a lack of resources. We need dynamic resource allocation to make sure that when the problem was a lack of resources. We need made a more sensible intervention earlier when he said.

7.57 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I beg Members’ indulgence for a few moments as I bring some sad news to the Chamber. A former Member, Sir Reginald Eyre, who represented Birmingham, Hall Green between 1965 and 1987, has passed away at the age of 94. He was very proud to represent Birmingham, having been born there in 1925. His father was a transport worker and his mother was a shopkeeper.

As a young man, Reg had a great time cycling around the city at night putting out tracer fire laid down by the Luftwaffe, and occasionally dancing on unexploded bombs for a dare. He spent the second half of the war as a midshipman in the north Atlantic and the Mediterranean. He would speak movingly of how, when he was not yet 20, he was in the Royal Naval College in Greenwich and told to go home, put his affairs in order and say goodbye to his loved ones, because the chances were that he and his friends would not be coming back. I like to think that he was delighted that, some 70 years later, he stood in the same place to give his only daughter away in marriage—to me, in fact, as he was my father-in-law. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”]

After the war, Reg went to Cambridge—the first man in his family to do so—and then became a successful midlands solicitor before entering the House in a by-election in 1965. He served his country and party with great distinction. He was a Minister for the environment and for transport—he took great joy in having broken one of Livingstone’s London transport strikes. He was a vice-chair of the party, and he was also a Whip. Under different circumstances, I might be at home with my family at the moment, but from the great beyond I can hear his voice saying, “There’s a vote tonight. Don’t you dare, old chap. Don’t you dare.”

While serving in this place, Reg went on a trip to Kenya. There he met a beautiful young actress called Anne Clements. Anne was and is some decades his
junior, but it was the start of a wonderful and happy marriage that lasted the rest of his life. On leaving this place, Reg went back to Birmingham and became chair of the Birmingham Heartlands Development Corporation. He was extraordinarily proud of the opportunity to breathe new life into our great second city. He leaves a great legacy behind him.

Reg was one of those people whom everyone automatically warmed to and everyone instinctively liked. He was very proud of his country and particularly proud of his city. He was proud of his party and proud of this place, but most of all he was terribly proud of his wonderful wife and his wonderful daughter. All of them, from country to family, had very good cause to be proud of him, too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sure I speak on behalf of the whole House when I say that that was a very warm and loving tribute. Our condolences to you and your family.

8.1 pm  

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I, too, want to send my condolences. Maybe it is convenient that I am speaking after the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), because I was born and raised, and both my children were born and raised, in Birmingham Hall Green. I am sure I express the feelings of everybody in Birmingham when I send massive condolences to the Member and his family. It does not matter what path we tread, we are all human in this place. Any man who loved the city that I love has my full and utmost respect. Best wishes to his family.

I want to say a massive thank you to Members who have spoken throughout the debate about their support for Birmingham. They may not have noticed it, but many Government Members have been encouraging more spending in areas where there is high migration. I thank those Conservative Members who have suggested that Birmingham needs more resources. Perhaps the Minister could explain to me why so many of those resources have been cut when they feel that way about areas with high migration. It sticks slightly in the craw of a person who grew up in Birmingham to listen to people, who do not live among migrants and who do not live in diverse places, talk about how difficult it is for communities who have to live in places of high migration. Well, it is not difficult. It is not difficult at all. It is a total pleasure to live among migrant communities.

My husband is very concerned. He believes he may be the only person in the entirety of Birmingham not to have heritage elsewhere that allows him a passport in places of high migration. It is one of the best things and that is why this place should have to scrutinise every fundamental change that happens to our immigration system. That should not be abandoned and given over in Henry VIII powers.

My deep worry is that the system proposed in the Bill will not be independent enough. Let us be honest. Those on one side of the House have far less experience of working with the immigration system and its pitfalls than those of us on the Opposition Benches. I imagine that I do more immigration casework in one day than some Conservative Members do in an entire year. It is only right that this place is the place of scrutiny for immigration. That should not be abandoned and given over in Henry VIII powers.

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. It is the best thing about this place and our democracy. We should be really, really proud of it. It is genuinely responsive. Migrant communities who live in my constituency sometimes come out door knocking with me. They cannot believe that I am walking around the streets knocking on people’s doors. They are like, “Gosh, in my home country, you’d be driving past in an SUV with blacked-out windows.” It is one of the best things and that is why this place should have to scrutinise every fundamental change that happens to our immigration system.

I want to make a point that has been well made in the debate. The idea of a £30,000 limit providing a sense of what skill base there is is absolutely flabbergasting. The only job I have ever had that paid me more than £30,000 is the one I am doing right now. That is not unusual for people who live where I live. It is not unusual for people to say that that was a very warm and loving tribute. Our
in Birmingham Hall Green, Birmingham Yardley or Birmingham anywhere. I was considered to be skilled and to be high management in the jobs that I did, and I did not earn that much money. It has been pointed out that there needs to be a massive equality impact assessment of how the £30,000 rule is meted out, because obviously men earn more than women and we need to know whether it will have a discriminatory effect on women workers. What about part-time workers? Will the £30,000 be pro rata? If somebody was only earning £5,000 but were only working one day a week, would that count as £30,000? How exactly will that work and how will it be fair to women? The idea that ordinary people are not skilled—we have to be careful with this language—and the idea that my constituents are not skilled because they do not earn over £30,000 is frankly insulting. It is insulting on every level to our care workers, our nurses, our teachers—there are so many people who do not earn over £30,000. I really think that that needs to be revisited.

Perversely, since I was elected I have met many people who earn more than £30,000 and have literally no discernible skills, not even one. I met none before—I thought I had met posh people before I came here, but I had actually just met people who eat olives. I had no idea of how posh a person could be. Waitrose is apparently not the marker for being really, really posh. There is a lovely Waitrose in Birmingham Hall Green; it is the one I like to frequent. I have not necessarily met such people in this place, although there is a smattering. I would not let some of those very rich people who earn huge amounts of money hold my pint if I had to go and vote while in the bar, because they would almost certainly do it wrong.

I want to speak up for the ordinary people of Birmingham Hall Green and Birmingham Yardley, who are incredibly proud of the migration to their country, and are proud that people want to come here. Those people are skilled, and we should care much more about them than I think sometimes we do.

8.11 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart). I was not going to mention this, but it now seems appropriate: my mother, Sheila Lillian Harman Kerr, passed away on Thursday evening. She was a daughter of Birmingham, so I have a bit of Brum inside me. Members may not be able to discern it from my accent, but a bit of Birmingham lingers in my heart. I feel she might be smiling at the fact that I am following such an excellent Member of Parliament for Birmingham and someone who represents someone who was a servant of the city of Birmingham.

I rise to support the Second Reading of this Bill on a key matter relating to our departure from the European Union: control over our borders. I thank Ministers for their decision to scrap the charges for the settled status process for EU citizens. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for the very significant part he played in bringing that about. I know how much that means to people in my constituency. It is very important that our actions in government match our words. We must send a clear message to our family members, friends, neighbours and colleagues who have come to this country from the European Union, and to those who have come from outside the country, that they are a vital part of our community. They enrich our lives and play a hugely valuable part in our economy, and I deeply regret any suggestion from any source to the contrary. Members of this House owe it to their constituents and the reputation of this House to measure the way they express themselves about such matters, and in interventions they make in debates about our departure from the European Union.

I have several points to make about the Bill. The first is about the university sector, and the University of Stirling in particular. In a report for Destination for Education, KPMG calculated that every international student recruited to a British university brings a net positive economic contribution of £95,000 in total. For the academic year 2015-16, that was estimated to be worth £20.3 billion. We are talking about a major British exporting success. I am proud of the UK university sector’s global standing, and I am proud that the University of Stirling is consistently highly rated as a destination of choice for international students. Stirling loves its international students and welcomes them with open arms.

Our world-class university system is the envy of the world and an unrivalled source of soft power influence in the world. I do not believe that student visas should be subject to any kind of cap, and I was encouraged by the Home Secretary’s remarks on that matter. We are competing with other English-speaking countries. By making it more difficult to access British universities than those of our competitors, we are doing ourselves no favours. We are in danger of losing market share in a growing global market. International students applying for bona fide courses at bona fide institutions should be allowed to come here. After all, they will support themselves.

We need a visa system that reflects an unabashed bias towards attracting and retaining talent, including newly qualified international graduates and postgraduates from UK universities. Why on earth would we not want such talent to stay in the United Kingdom to the benefit of our economy and the public good? As with other issues that we examine in this House, we must look for the balance of fairness. It is not fair or right to expect an international worker, graduate or postgraduate to earn more than £30,000 per annum, and to say that they qualify as skilled labour only on that basis. That would be a terrible mistake. The average graduate salary in Scotland is in the region of £21,000. Instead of rigidly fixing the system to a formula based on notional taxation contributions, we should look at earnings potential and social contribution.

We must be fair to businesses of all sizes. I ask hon. Members to consider how difficult it is for a small business to sponsor an international worker for employment in the United Kingdom. I worked for a global business before coming to this House, but what works for a big business does not necessarily work for a small business. The test of what is good for our economy is not how a global corporation copes with an imposed process, but how it works for a small business with limited resources.

I say this to the Government: beware of a one-size-fits-all approach to skilled labour. I would have thought that it is stating the obvious to say that what works in London and the south-east will not be right for other parts of
the United Kingdom, so we must build flexibility into whatever policy we apply. The variables must be weighted to ensure that skilled labour can be attracted and retained in all parts of the United Kingdom and all scales of business.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I rather suspect the hon. Gentleman will not agree that immigration should be devolved, so let us park that to one side. What role should the devolved Governments have in setting UK immigration policy?

Stephen Kerr: I have long said in this House and outside it that the best way forward for the people of Scotland is for Scotland’s two Governments to work closely together, and I have made suggestions about how working together might be interpreted in a constitutional machinery sense. I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. I think it is important that Scotland’s Governments work together on this issue.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am extremely grateful for that. Will the hon. Gentleman explain that point? What should the devolved Governments’ role be? Should they get to set student numbers or have different salary thresholds?

Stephen Kerr: I do not think we should be talking about student numbers at all. The Home Secretary said earlier that there should be no cap on student numbers. It is important that we establish a constitutional process whereby the Governments of Scotland work together and talk and listen to each other.

David Linden: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He knows how much respect I have for him. The Immigration Minister is on the record as saying that she would not grant the Scottish Government powers that she would not grant to Lincolnshire County Council. Does he support her view on that matter?

Stephen Kerr: I have made it clear what I think should be happening in how Scotland’s two Governments work together.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Kerr: I will not give way again, because I am now using my own time.

A lot more must be done about seasonal workers. It cannot be said often enough that a rigid system for seasonal workers will cause untold damage to the rural economy and to sectors such as hospitality and tourism, both of which are vital to my Stirling constituency.

We must also be fair to everyone and enforce the laws that we pass in this place. Will the Minister enlighten me about how we check and measure that people are leaving the United Kingdom? That should be straightforward enough in this data-driven age. It would help us not only to secure our borders against illegal immigration but to support those who may be able to remain but have outstayed their current visas. I have casework to that end.

Leaving the EU allows us to have a non-presidential—non-presidential? That may be as well, but it would allow us also to have a non-prejudicial immigration system that does not simply allow free movement for people from the EU but opens us up to the wider world of talent—to skilled workers, to knowledge workers, to compassionate workers, to people who would make a welcome contribution to our society. Stirling is open to business, to students and to people from across Europe and the world, and I want to see that continue well into the future.

I hope that Ministers will appreciate that we have challenges to meet in my part of Scotland. Stirling is the most beautiful place in these islands to live and work, with doorstep access to Scotland’s great cities and the wilderness beauty of the highlands, and we have secured an exciting city deal that will help us to explore the full potential of our local economy, but we need the ability to attract people to come and make their homes and their living in our communities. The SNP Government do not help much in that regard by making Scotland the highest-taxed part of the UK.

I will undoubtedly support the Second Reading of the Bill tonight because I fully support its purpose, but further down the line, when other measures come about resulting from the White Paper consultation, I will of course do what I feel is in the best interests of our country and my constituents.

8.21 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who from a lifetime of experience is in the right place on this issue.

The nature of a country and the values that underpin it are often reflected in the rules of its immigration system. On that basis, the United Kingdom could be seen as hostile, expensive, often offensive and demeaning, and overly restrictive. That is not the type of country I wish to help to lead from this House. Our immigration system should be fair, both to those who wish to come here and those already here, and should strike a balance between rights, restrictions, contributions and rewards for those who wish to come and be a part of our great country.

At a time of rising populism, the Bill was an important opportunity for the Government to set the right tone, but on that measure they have failed, not least because the Bill is remarkably light on detail, instead giving Ministers wide powers to make up the rules as they see fit. It gives the House no insight into what they seek to do. It fails to recognise either the positive contribution migrants make to our country or the positive bottom line for UK plc; it fails to recognise the rights of British citizens living in the EU—in greater numbers than EU citizens in Britain; and it fails to recognise the different types of immigration, whether they be those who come because we need them, those who come to contribute, or those who come seeking asylum. Nothing in the Bill sets out what type of country we seek to become—what type of country we wish to be—and that is a grave missed opportunity.

The Bill offers little hope to people in Bristol North West, whether the hundreds of doctors, nurses and social care workers at Southmead Hospital, or the migrant labourers in Avonmouth working in our warehousing and logistics business, or the people I meet in my constituency surgery week in, week out, including, sadly, victims of modern slavery—I know the Government
have done great work on that, and I pay tribute to them and look forward to the conclusions of the review of ways of strengthening the support victims receive—or its scientists, researchers and technology entrepreneurs.

A recent report by the Science and Technology Select Committee, on which I sit, noted that collaboration across disciplinary and geographical boundaries was the foundation of scientific and technological endeavour— one this country has a proud history of leading and no doubt wishes to lead in the future—but also highlighted the overly restrictive tier 1 visa system for exceptional talent and how difficult the tier 2 system made it for employees and employers who want and need to be here to come here. It also dealt with long and short-term stays for the purposes of research and collaboration on innovation. We are failing to be able to bring the best scientific teams and technological minds to our country at a time when we need them not only to fuel our own GDP and economic success but to secure our position in the world as a leader in science and innovation.

I have a few questions that I hope the Minister will respond to when she sums up, although some have been asked already. First, in respect of the many nurses and social care workers and other low-paid workers, including scientists and innovation and tech entrepreneurs in Bristol earning less than £30,000 a year, are the Government not confusing vital skills with pay, and pay with value? The value that many of our low-paid workers, whether in healthcare or other settings, add to my constituents is hugely valuable but may not be reflected in their pay. We should be saying in this country that we welcome their contribution to creating a fairer, more open and more tolerant society, but instead we are saying that they do not earn enough to have the right to be here.

Secondly, is it right that amendments to immigration policy should not be debated on the Floor of the House? I understand that the Government have given themselves this power in the Bill, but surely the Minister will today confirm that they will not use that power to bring those matters to the House, both for debate and in the interests of their own accountability. Thirdly, there has been some concern about EU citizens who reside in this country for valid reasons other than exercising their treaty rights and whether they will be protected as part of the transitional arrangements if we leave the EU. I hope the Minister will clarify that distinction. She says “when” we leave the EU. I am hopeful that we will not be doing so.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Hear, hear.

Darren Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that.

Fourthly, in response to the report by the Science and Technology Committee, which I recommend to all right hon. and hon. Members, I hope the Minister will say how she and her Department will seek to meet the requirements I mentioned in order that we might stay at the forefront of international collaboration on scientific endeavour.

Lastly, I assume the Government will not admit it, but this is a prime opportunity to set out what type of country we want to be, whether Brexit happens or not; to say to people around the world who Britain is and what their experience will be here; to say to people who live in this country what values we expect of our communities and what we will not condone and that xenophobia is not welcome, regardless of what people felt they could and could not say as a consequence of the leave campaign; to set out afresh a new, innovative, welcoming and fair immigration system that brings to life the values that supposedly represent the Treasury Bench’s intentions for this country. Instead, it is a failure on all the measures I have set out, so I will happily not be supporting the Bill this evening.

8.27 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). I am reminded of a trip we took together last year to the United States when one of the last things we did was visit the State of Massachusetts’ refugee and immigration programme. It had some interesting ideas for both supporting refugees and making them valuable members of society, including by finding them jobs. We might want to learn from that.

Let me start by expressing an interest in the subject of immigration, as the husband of an immigrant, but an immigrant from outside the European Union. Before I came to the House, my wife and I began to be experts in the immigration process. My wife, who is from Azerbaijan—outside the EU, as I have said—is often surprised by how easy it has been in the past, and, we hope, will be in the future—indeed, I am sure that it will be—for EU citizens not only to stay here, but to continue to come here to work. I welcome not only the Bill but the 12-month consultation with business and services throughout the United Kingdom, which should set the country on course for a truly fair immigration system that reflects the country’s priorities.

Let me also compare my view with that expressed by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) at the beginning of his speech. Scottish Conservative Members share an understanding of the issues faced in Scotland by industries such as fisheries and agriculture, and the problem of the shortage of skilled labour at home and its availability overseas. We may simply differ in regard to the solutions that we envisage.

In June 2016, 17.4 million people in the United Kingdom—including, it is estimated, the majority of voters in Banff and Buchan—voted to leave the European Union, and there can be no denying that a desire to take back control of our borders was one of the many reasons for that vote. In 2017, along with other Members, I was elected to represent the people in a Scottish constituency on the basis of a manifesto that had pledged to respect the referendum mandate, which included an end to free movement, and I believe that the Bill delivers on that promise. I also believe that it marks another necessary step towards a new immigration system that we seek to meet the requirements of people from all countries, and a system that is skills-based and tailored to our economy, society and public services.

Stephen Kerr: Does not every major social attitudes survey that has ever been conducted in Scotland indicate that the attitudes of the Scottish people towards immigration are not remarkably different from those of people in the United Kingdom as a whole?
David Duguid: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the wide range of opinions on immigration across the United Kingdom, across Scotland and across my constituency, and, no doubt, his own.

The vision of a future skills-based immigration system tailored to our economy was set out in the UK Government’s December White Paper, which I welcomed as a strong basis for our future immigration system. One of the challenges that we will face as we implement that system is ensuring that it works for all sectors of our economy—both public and private—and for parts of the country with high unemployment and those with low unemployment alike.

I am happy to say that Banff and Buchan is an area with low unemployment, and there is good reason to believe that more jobs will come to the area in the years ahead. As home to the great fishing ports of Peterhead, Fraserburgh and Macduff, among others, the constituency stands to gain from Brexit as we leave the common fisheries policy. If we embrace that sea of opportunity, Banff and Buchan will be on course to gain thousands of new skilled jobs in fishing itself, in seafood processing, and in other sectors such as maritime engineering, and those jobs will in turn lift the wider local economy in hospitality and other public services. That, combined with our already low claimant count, is why it is so important for Banff and Buchan that we get our future immigration policy right. We can only make the most of the golden opportunity that is on the horizon if the key sectors of our local economy have access to the labour that they need, and the labour of which there are shortages.

I should make it clear that I am not calling for those sectors to have unrestricted access to cheap low-skilled labour. The fisheries sector wants to be able to rely on local labour and is willing to work substantively towards that goal, but we are not there yet. The Scottish White Fish Producers Association has estimated that, much as we want to reach a point at which we are, if not totally, at least partially, free of foreign labour, much more reliant on local labour than we currently are, that could take up to 10 years.

In the short and medium term, the fisheries sector will need to employ a significant amount of migrant labour if it is to keep going at its current level, let alone make the most of our taking back control of our waters. Like other sectors, it is increasingly looking outside the EU for skilled and experienced crew, and for skilled—or at least competent—workers in our local economy with it, to make the most of what Brexit has to offer. To achieve that, we must lay the groundwork first, and that is why this Bill is so important. This is what the vote to leave the EU was about; it was not just about immigration, but about control in the wider sense—the ability of this country and this Parliament to control and decide our own immigration policy; not to end immigration, but to ensure that our businesses and services can source the skills they need. This Bill provides a great opportunity for Banff and Buchan and for the United Kingdom as a whole, and I will support it as a means towards taking that opportunity.

I want to conclude by reminding my right hon. Friend the Minister of concerns I have raised previously regarding the level of skills that are considered “skilled” for immigration purposes. I would also welcome further discussion around the detail of salary levels, which has been mentioned by other hon. Members. The Migration Advisory Committee has suggested a £30,000 level for guidance, but I would welcome the opportunity to discuss that further, and as I said at the start of my speech, I particularly welcome the 12-month consultation process that the Department will be taking with businesses and services around the country.

In summary, I support this Bill.

8.35 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): First, may I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests in relation to immigration matters? May I also say upfront that I strongly endorse the remarks of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the support she has from a number of other right hon. and hon. Members around the House for taking action on indefinite immigration detention, which I think we can all agree is an obscene reflection on our current system?

It has been a pleasure to hear so many Members from around the House speaking so positively of the contribution and value immigrants have brought to our country over so many years, and it is true in my constituency, too: we are proud to be home to so many diverse communities, and I hope that the message that has gone forth from the House tonight to those who are here now or who might be considering making their home here in future is, “You will be welcome; you will be valued members of our community; and we will make sure that during your time spent in this country, you will be looked after well and can be happy.”

This Bill is very light on detail, yet it offers very wide powers to Ministers to implement all sorts of potential changes via immigration rules. While I appreciate that that is the way that many immigration changes are brought in already under our present system, the Bill’s ending of free movement represents a seismic change in our immigration system that I believe—and I think this belief is widespread—ought to be subject to careful parliamentary scrutiny.

We also know that our existing immigration system, which is presumably to be transplanted across in some degree to EEA nationals in future, is already flawed, and we have rightly heard about Windrush. I would also highlight the recent DNA debacle, which we do not want to be replicated for future immigrants coming to this country, as we fear.

We are pleased that the Government have asked the Law Commission to look at how immigration rules might be simplified, but it seems premature or, indeed,
Inconsistent to ask it to do so while asking us to give powers to Ministers to make ongoing changes that the commission will not be able to take account of. The Henry VIII powers in this Bill are very inappropriate in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, especially in the light of the direction of travel laid out in the White Paper and in particular, as we have heard again and again tonight, the very significant concerns about the £30,000 income threshold to assess whether a migrant has the skills to mean that we would want them to make their home here. As we have heard tonight, income is not commensurate with skills, and qualifications are not commensurate with the skills we may need across a whole range of sectors. I hope that the Minister has heard the widespread concerns around the House and will look again at that threshold after tonight’s debate.

I want to echo comments made, including by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the shadow Home Secretary, about the Government’s proposal for short-term work visas. These have some place in an immigration system, but on a large scale they will be inefficient for employers, create insecurity for individuals, damage family solidarity since family members will not be eligible to come in with those on short-term visas and damage community cohesion and integration. I particularly say to the Minister that there is a serious risk of the exploitation of vulnerable migrant workers on these short-term visas, as well as the risk that they will undercut UK workers if unscrupulous employers choose to take advantage of this system.

We will need strong protections at the very least to support a short-term workers visa scheme, yet today our labour market inspectorate is not well resourced. Indeed, Focus on Labour Exploitation tells me that we are at about half the global benchmark of inspectors to workers—it should be one inspector for every 10,000 workers. FLEX calculates that, given that benchmark, businesses face inspection on average once every 500 years. There is great concern about Ministers’ ability to make immigration rules that might increase the vulnerability of those workers without full parliamentary scrutiny.

The Bill will allow Ministers to change rules on social security co-ordination, which is important in facilitating employment mobility. That is good for the economy and for individuals, but it is also a matter of fairness to individuals who have contributed and who have expectations about their entitlements going forward. I hope that the Minister will categorically rule out any possibility that the Government would in future unilaterally with draw security rights in the event of no deal or after the transition period.

I also want to express concerns for those who do not or cannot regularise their status, including some of those applying for settled status, or those who might become irregular in future, perhaps as overstayers. The current rules on income thresholds are particularly damaging for families, creating a risk of poverty and homelessness. In a number of debates about our Brexit plans over the past years, I have highlighted particular concerns about the wellbeing of children. Again, I underline that issue for the Minister tonight. The Refugee and Migrant Children’s Consortium has particular concerns about children, because both EEA and non-EEA children might become subject to rules under which they have no recourse to public funds, creating huge hardship and, as we have heard, shunting costs to local authorities, which will have to pick up the pieces as a result. I hope that tonight the Minister might commit to relaxing or at least looking at relaxing the exceptional circumstances criteria set out in the 2012 immigration rules changes, so that families with dependants under the age of 18 have access to the public funds they need.

There are also concerns about the cost of regularising one’s status and the complexity of the process. There was a welcome U-turn on fees for applying for settled status earlier this month, but the system is still complex. We have to be worried when the Home Secretary has spoken about the 90% success rate for those going to the beta testing phase—even in a relatively limited control group, 10% of cases cannot easily or readily acquire settled status. There is great worry that that ratio might increase in future as more vulnerable individuals make their applications.

I am concerned about exceptionally high fees and repeat fees for those who will not be applying for settled status, such as those who might arrive in future and will then go on to the 10-year path to citizenship. Will Ministers reconsider the impact of that, particularly on children and young people?

What advice are the Government offering to families to ensure that applicants can achieve the highest form of status to which they are entitled? For example, a child with a claim to British citizenship should be able to make that claim in their own right and not be expected simply to be reliant on the lower settled status that might be available to their parent. That leads me to ask the Minister about information and advice, and to ask her to consider the importance of ensuring legal aid and appeal rights.

I do not welcome the Bill tonight. In many ways, it will be bad, especially for the most vulnerable in our country. It will have worrying equality impacts, as we have heard from a number of colleagues, and it leaves the future very uncertain for EEA and UK nationals alike. In those circumstances, I look forward to voting against the Bill because it does not give our country and the individuals living in it now and in the future the rights and good will that they deserve.

8.44 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Immigration is an enormously sensitive subject, and it is important that we pick our words with sensitivity. I often sit in this place listening to foreign affairs discussions about countries that millions of people are fleeing—we were talking about Venezuela earlier—and I remember how lucky we are to live in a country to which people want to come, not one they want to flee. We are lucky to live in a country in which people have had freedom and where our history has given us freedom. In many European countries, people remember what it was like not to have freedom. Under communism in Poland, people were not allowed to leave the country. In East Germany, people in Berlin were not allowed to cross the wall, even to visit a family member.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) said earlier that we needed to stop freedom of movement to counter
extremism. However, is it not the point of freedom of movement to put into the past the kind of extremism that built the Berlin wall?

Vicky Ford: Let me continue my point. Under communism, people were trapped in a prison in their own country, and to many across Europe, especially eastern Europe, freedom of movement is a deeply cherished right and we must remember to respect it in our own language.

How did we get to where we are today, when so many people in the UK feel that freedom of movement is not right for us? For me, there were two huge errors in our history. The first came under the Labour Government in the early 2000s when 10 new countries joined the EU and the then Government vastly underestimated the impact of migration and did not introduce transitional controls. I remember the impact on many towns across the east of England, which I represented as a Member of the European Parliament. I am thinking of towns such as Wisbech, Thetford and King’s Lynn, which saw a huge influx of people, putting real pressure on local services.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady therefore support the reintroduction of the migration impact fund, which was designed by the Labour Government to do just what she describes?

Vicky Ford: Sadly, the fund did not have the necessary impact at that point, but I would support measures to reassure local communities in which we see migration. Having knocked on many doors and spoken to many people, that was one of the key reasons why so many people voted leave in the referendum—not necessarily in other places, but in those towns.

The second error happened during David Cameron’s negotiations with the EU. He tried to explain the impact that migration had had on those communities, but for one reason or another, the EU leaders gave the perception—whether it was real or untrue—that they simply were not listening and were not prepared to try to help introduce some of the reassurances that those communities needed. We are where we are today because of those two errors.

The vast majority of people who come to our country work hard, pay taxes and make huge contributions to our communities and our society, and we are stronger and better as a result. Post Brexit, it is vital that we continue to be a country that welcomes and values those who want to come here. I will support the Bill tonight, because we need to reassure communities that we listened to the message from the referendum, but we must have a migration system that works for people who bring skills, talent and sheer hard work.

I want to talk about four sectors: the NHS and social care, science and research, universities, and tech. I come from a medical family. Both my parents were doctors; my sister is a doctor; and I am married to a doctor. One in 10 of the doctors in our hospitals and across our health service come from other countries. Yes, we will train more in the future, and I am delighted that the first of the next generation of medical schools has now opened in my constituency of Chelmsford, where we are already training 100 new doctors. However, we cannot forget the contribution made to our health and social care sectors by those who have come from other countries. A lot of those people are not on high pay, and the suggested salary threshold will risk cutting out and excluding some of them, so I ask the Minister to look at that.

This is not just about salary. I often hear people ask, “If I come and do extra qualifications here, will I be able to take those qualifications back to another country if I then choose to move?” Issues such as the mutual recognition of professional qualifications are important when discussing our immigration system and our ongoing relationship with Europe.

David Duguid: I apologise to the House for bringing my wife back into the conversation, but, as she is a qualified midwife and general nurse from outside the EU, one of her frustrations is with the impossibility of her qualifications being recognised. Does my hon. Friend welcome at least the potential of the Bill to recognise such qualifications?

Vicky Ford: I am delighted that my hon. Friend raises that point. One of my reasons for voting for the withdrawal agreement is that in the future partnership discussions, in black and white, is the continued mutual recognition of professional qualifications. That level of detail on such issues is so important. Yes, we must continue to welcome those with training and real skills, so we must make sure those skills, as well as the individual, can be moved.

I am a member of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, which has done a huge amount of work on the future of the visa and migration system. This country has world leaders in science research, and we are a world leader because people come here from all over the world. We must make sure that we remain open to the best brains and the best talent, but that does not just mean the top professors; it also means skilled lab technicians and PhD students, and we need to make sure our visa system works for them, too.

Mobility is important. Scientists need to be able to move from country to country. I often give the example that people who work on the British Antarctic Survey will, by definition, not be spending 12 months of every year in Britain. They need to go to Antarctica. Scientists often need to go backwards and forwards to work and study, so a fixed regime that says they have to stay here for x number of years and cannot move backwards and forwards does not work for them.

Bureaucracy was raised by a previous speaker, and scientists need to be able to act fast. A post-doc who has been offered a two-year or three-year grant to get their research done does not want to hang around for six months to find out whether they have their visa. They will go to a country that will make the decision faster, so we need to make sure that we can act quickly. And when we are welcoming scientists, we must make sure that we also welcome their families, who will want to come with them, and we must have a policy to encourage that.

I was touched by what techUK told us before this debate. The UK tech sector is growing two and a half times as fast as the rest of the economy, and one in five of those working in the sector was not born in the UK. They are young, highly talented and highly mobile, and again the salary threshold may not be a proxy for skills in this area.
I am lucky to have a university in my constituency, and my universities are thriving and exciting places to be. Nearly one in three of our academics, and nearly one in every two of those on research-only contracts, was not born in the UK. Again, if the £30,000 threshold were to be agreed—it is not finalised—it may not be the right proxy for talent, and the universities have repeatedly made that point.

We need to make sure that we continue to have overseas students, who add so much to our universities, and I would like the Minister to consider the arrangements for post-study work. In Australia, for example, a student can stay for two to four years after their degree. If we want to compete for talent with countries like Australia, we need to give students more time.

My final point is that I am not one of those who says that the Government should be rushing into decisions on this. I do not blame them for taking time to get this right, as they need to take the time to consult. We need a system that rebuilds trust and confidence in parts of our country where people feel let down by the previous system. I want to make sure we have a system that is the best in the world and that we look at experiences from other countries. I want to end up with a system that welcomes people with skills and talents, welcomes people who want to come here to work hard and welcomes people who have come here to flee horror. That is the message I would like to leave the Minister with.

**Mr Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): When I consider the whole issue of immigration in this country, the first thing that comes to mind is thwarted opportunity—squandered opportunity. I am reminded of Billy Connolly’s eulogy at Jimmy Reid’s funeral. He was talking about the conversations he used to have with Jimmy Reid, with one wonderful anecdote being about driving past a high-rise tower block. Jimmy was saying, “Think about this, Billy. When you look at all those windows, imagine that behind each of them is a world champion horse rider or a Nobel prize winning chemist. They are all there. They are all there with that potential, but they will never realise it because they have never been given the opportunity to achieve it—because society has determined from their youngest years that they will never realise their inherent potential to be as good as they can be and to realise their talents.”

That is a question of not only poverty, but our immigration system. The same dynamic plays out. Tragically, it is often a function of people in poverty finding the wrong scapegoat—the wrong enemy—for their situation. The perennial problem of labour versus capital is the root cause of many of the tensions in our society today and many that caused this country to vote to leave the EU. Unless we understand those reasons and those underlying dynamics, we will fail to address those tensions.

Before I was elected as a Member of Parliament, I had a tangential involvement with immigration in this country—many people do, as they do not have many day-to-day dealings with it—but I remember one case that came close to home. I was working in the shipyards on the Clyde, having joined after graduating from Glasgow University. My starting salary was just £24,000, which is far below the £30,000 threshold. Many people of all sorts of nationalities—Australians, Canadians and Malaysians—were graduates working in the shipyards on the Clyde. One colleague had been awarded a PhD in unmanned underwater vehicles by Queen’s University Belfast, and she was a fantastic researcher. She also happened to fall in love at the same time with a Brazilian man who lived in Dublin and was studying there. She was in the invidious position of having to choose between her career in Glasgow and getting married to her fiancé.

**Ms Harman:** She should have chosen the career.

**Mr Sweeney:** Yes, perhaps she ought to have done.

The Home Office told my colleague that because her fiancé was resident in Dublin, he could not come to live with her in Glasgow. They had to move away to Brazil in order for him to apply to come to live in the UK, even though they had both been living in Ireland. What a bizarre anomaly that is! It is just one example of the absurd situation—the Kafkaesque nightmare—that people encounter. As a result of that situation, my colleague had to go to work in Dublin. She left her job on the shipyards on the Clyde: another example of potential lost to the industry on the Clyde and to Scotland.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Of course if the Brazilian gentleman had become a full Irish citizen, he would have been able to move through the common travel area without hindrance. There is a question here, and it is one the Scots Tories do not like. They do not want Scotland to be able to contribute to common travel area migration in the way that Dublin and the London Government can. Does the hon. Gentleman support the Scottish Government’s having the same rights to enable people to become citizens as the Irish Government have, and having them freely move within the common travel area, which is not a problem?

**Mr Sweeney:** One interesting and more laudable aspect of the Bill is that it does seek to maintain a common travel area. I recognise that there are many issues with the Bill, which is why I will not be supporting it. I will certainly be going through the Lobby to vote against it.

One of the fundamental issues with the Bill is the lack of flexibility and the rigidity of the system, of which the £30,000 is merely one example. I have talked about my personal example, but I also think of many of the people I know from university, including junior doctors who start on a salary well below the £30,000 threshold, or other people I know from other countries around the world who will not meet that threshold. It is an entirely arbitrary and utterly absurd threshold that will destroy potential in our country. That is one reason why, if the Bill does go into Committee, I will be looking to support amendments that remove the threshold, so that we can have a skills-based system rather than an arbitrary salary threshold.

There are also severe problems with the 12-month visa scheme, and there are all sorts of issues relating to the protection of workers’ rights, which are another fundamental root cause. It is not a question of immigration undermining wages and working conditions in this country; it is the fact that organised labour has been under systematic assault by this Government for many years.
That is what has driven down wages and why wages have stagnated. The power of organised labour to bargain collectively in this country has been systematically undermined by this Government. That is the root cause and the heart of the problem. It is not about immigration.

The swathe of Henry VIII powers that the Government seek to usurp from Parliament in favour of the Executive is extremely sinister and unacceptable. If the Bill receives its Second Reading tonight—I hope it does not—but it may well—that must be challenged in Committee.

The whole notion of an arbitrary cap on migrants panders to the worst sort of stereotypes and ought to be stopped. We cannot have a system that imposes such arbitrary limits. It is simply nonsensical from any sort of economic development perspective. Indeed, an arbitrary cap militates against any effort to try to improve the country’s prosperity.

I wholeheartedly support the proposal by the Mother of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), to introduce a 20-day limit to immigration detention. I deal closely with this issue in many constituency cases. The idea that this is the only country in Europe with a system of unlimited detention is absolutely shameful. The Government should accept my right hon. and learned Friend’s amendment without any Division and incorporate it into the Bill.

It would be a great gesture of good will and a great example of this country’s humanitarian tradition if we sought not to have arbitrary detention. In the past year, more than 10,000 have been detained in this country without limit. They can only count the days up; they cannot count the days down. Some 70% of those people are detained not because there is any sense that they have committed an offence; they are being detained entirely arbitrarily and it is an extremely distressing situation for many of them to be in. The system needs to be changed.

It is about not just the economic aspects but the opportunities denied because of our asylum system. Think of the huge talents thwarted. I have met doctors, surgeons, lawyers and chemists in my constituency who are all denied the opportunity to work in or contribute in any meaningful way to our society, because under our current asylum policy they are not able to work so are kept in limbo for years at a time. It affects not only the adults but those who came here, often as infants and small children, who have grown up as second-class citizens. There are very frustrated young adults in our society who have been denied the chance to go on holiday with their friends or to get student tuition. They have been denied any kind of meaningful recognition in our country.

I have confronted the appalling reality in my past 18 months or so as an MP. I have had to deal with more than 100 asylum cases in the past five months alone because of the Home Office’s failures to expedite those cases efficiently. I find it tragic when 18-year-olds are unable to take up a place to study law at university in Glasgow because they cannot get student finance because their immigration or asylum status has not been determined, or when champion boxers who want to represent Scotland internationally are unable to go abroad to fight in competitions because their asylum status has not been settled. That is shameful and a squandering of human talent and ability. That they are denied that chance is a collective loss to everyone in our country. It needs to be addressed urgently because it is a shameful situation.

The “move on” policy came into sharp focus in Glasgow last year. With the existing asylum contracts coming to a close in 2019, we learned that Serco, which had the asylum accommodation contract in Glasgow, was seeking to move on asylum seekers at a much faster rate than usual. We saw the prospect of mass destitution in Glasgow, because more than 300 potential evictions were going to happen. It is clear that the “move on” policy needs to be addressed. I would support measures to extend the period to give asylum seekers the right to assess where they are at the end of a process and to consider their right to appeal, without the threat of being turfed out on to the streets. That is especially true for those in particularly vulnerable situations when they have no recourse to public funds. If they are survivors of domestic abuse, care leavers or have dependants, it is shameful. We cannot be in a situation where they are reliant on charities to support them in the face of destitution. I just find that, in our country, that just cannot be acceptable. I hope that most people in this House recognise that appeal for basic dignity.

We face an economic challenge in Scotland, which we tried to address in previous years under a Labour Government through the fresh talent initiative. The initiative was successful in reversing Scotland’s historic population decline. From 1801 to 1901, the Scottish population grew by 180%, but from 1901 to 2001 it grew by just 10%, which was a huge demographic challenge for Scotland. The current immigration policy of this Government threatens to undo all that hard work to reverse Scotland’s population decline.

Having worked in Scottish enterprise, promoting initiatives such as the ScotGrad scheme, which has brought in international graduates and foreign language students to help promote Scottish exports abroad, I can say that the policy is a real threat to the future economic prosperity of this country. We must oppose this Bill for a number of reasons—reasons to do with thwarted opportunity, basic human dignity and economic opportunity. The Bill’s approach is totally wrongheaded. We need a new system rooted in economic opportunity, in human dignity and in the ability to grow our collective potential as a country.

9.5 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) spoke in great detail and with great skill about the many deficiencies of this Bill. I want to focus on just one: ending freedom of movement.

Since 2016, we have listened to those who wish to rip Scotland from the European Union speak triumphantly about the prospect of ending freedom of movement. They speak of this as if it is a victory that will benefit the people of this country. In truth, we cannot measure what will be lost. We will lose countless opportunities, relationships, stories and human experiences that would have been worth just as much to us culturally and socially as the billions of pounds that our EU membership generates every year.
Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Gavin Newlands: On the words “utterly senseless”, I give way to my hon. Friend.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I hope to make some sense with this thought, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thinking of the generational shift, does my hon. Friend think, as I do, that, in the past, the waters and the skies of Europe were filled with warring navies, whereas now they are filled with easyJet, Ryanair and low-cost airlines, and with people not thinking twice about darting across the continent, opening up economies and opening up people’s minds? Is it not the case that only the historically illiterate would cheer the ending of such a diplomatic channel?

Gavin Newlands: As usual, far from being senseless, my hon. Friend makes his point with force and acerbity, as is befitting of a budding statesman. I could not agree more—[Interruption.] I think that I have perhaps gone too far with that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We had to listen to vacuous calls for reductions in the number of EU citizens making their homes and their lives here. We saw the Eurosceptics’ de facto leader stand in front of Nazi-inspired political advertising that cynically equated desperate refugees fleeing war-torn areas of the world with EU citizens. Those Eurosceptics lied about the money for the national health service and they lied about Turkey joining the EU. Some even promised that we could stay in the single market and yet still somehow end freedom of movement.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): There is one other point that we do not often hear. I am somebody who benefited from freedom of movement, which gave me career and educational opportunities. Why should anybody in here have the right to take away those opportunities for those who come after us?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more; my hon. Friend makes a very sensible point.

Gavin Newlands: As I was saying, these are all monumental and unforgiveable lies. Perhaps the remain campaign should have challenged them more effectively. Perhaps the national media were too complacent to hold the liars to account, or—more likely in the case of the Daily Mail, the Daily Express, The Sun and others—were actually complicit in those lies. Perhaps people like me, who opposed Brexit, could have been better at telling the real story of the benefits of EU membership and the privileges that we should never—but perhaps did—take for granted.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that it is an absolute tragedy that the UK came at the bottom of the list of EU countries that were able to give a positive view of the EU, and that it is only in the last year or two that newspapers in the UK have been reappointing EU correspondents?

Gavin Newlands: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

When confronted with these alternative facts as portrayed in the media and by some hon. Members here, who can actually blame some people for agreeing to what amounted to a quick fix? The difference between the attitude and actions of the Scottish Government and the Westminster Government following the referendum in 2016 was stark. Immediately after the result was announced, the First Minister of Scotland gave an open-hearted address to EU citizens and the message was crystal clear—“We want you to come to Scotland and we want you to stay”—whereas the Tories spoke of bargaining chips.

Scotland rejected the false promises, the hate-filled rhetoric and the lies. We did this because something greater is being offered in our country. In Scotland, the largest party has been proudly in favour of immigration and freedom of movement. Some politicians in this place are scared to follow this example, but it can be an easy argument to win; they just have to make it. I say to the Leader of the Opposition and some on his Benches that politicians are here not merely to follow public opinion, but to lead it—to persuade and debate the merits of a policy, not to cower meekly in the corner desperately waiting for 29 March to come and go. That is not leadership. It is a total abdication of responsibility.

Freedom of movement is the greatest achievement that we have reached together in the European Union, and it is the single greatest reason why we must remain members. Programmes such as Erasmus allow for an unprecedented exchange of ideas between the students who populate Europe’s rich universities. Millions of people from the UK’s constituent nations, including many Scots, choose to retire to quiet lives on the Mediterranean and millions of others travel across the continent, taking in Europe’s vast cultural heritage. Others have built careers abroad in every conceivable field, allowing us to advance every aspect of our shared society.

Just before the withdrawal agreement, I made a call on social media for people to tell me their stories and experiences of freedom of movement. During the withdrawal agreement debate, I raised the story of Ivan and his family. Ivan was born in Spain, studied in Italy and has worked all over Scotland in Scotland’s NHS. He met his Irish wife, who then went on to work in Denmark. They have had two daughters born in Scotland—one with an Irish passport and one with a Spanish passport, but both indisputably Scottish.
I have other constituents with similar experiences. My constituent Emma Hendrie is a 21-year-old student who studied for a semester at Ghent University in Belgium. Once her fellow students got just by an apparently strong Paisley accent, she became lifelong friends with people from Europe and beyond. Alison Hughes lived in the Netherlands on two different occasions, which was a great experience for her children and her family, who got to meet other children from all over the world. Mark Harold emigrated to Lithuania in 2005 to work on music projects, and stayed for many years. Mark was eventually elected to the city council and is now the night mayor of Vilnius; he is the only non-citizen to have sworn on the Lithuanian constitution. Sandra and Steve Murray wrote to me to tell me their story of making a new home in a small village on the French-Spanish border that is populated by Spanish, French, German, Dutch, Belgian, English, Irish and Swedish people, as well as people from many other nations. Their only wish was that the UK would adopt the Scottish view that we all want the same things—peace, equality and opportunity.

This is what we are about to lose. How can we in this place rip this from our young people, who voted overwhelmingly to remain? How can we rip Scotland out of the free movement area when the Scottish people overwhelmingly voted to continue to have this freedom? My message today is this: I understand that millions of people across England are disillusioned with politics and are yearning for something better, and I am sorry that there is no major party that can help them at this point. I do not blame them for their anger; I am often angry about the situation myself.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con) rose—

Gavin Newlands: I would give way but I am conscious that others want to speak, and I am coming to the end of my speech.

Scotland does have an alternative: Scotland voted to remain. I hope that colleagues across the House will reject this Bill and ultimately give people a chance to have the final say. I also reiterate that immigration powers must be devolved to Scotland so that we can get on with building an open and welcoming immigration system that works in the interests of Scotland. However, it would seem that Scotland’s interests are now wholly incompatible with those of the rest of the UK. That leads to the only clear solution—to become like every other normal country and secure our independence so that we might forge that better future.

To conclude, perhaps on a note of consensus, we have just marked Robert Burns Day, so I would like to ask hon. Members to reflect on some words from Scotland’s immortal bard—not “parcel of rogues”, although rarely would that particular verse have been apt, but this:

“For a’ that, an’ a’ that,
It’s coming yet for a’ that,
That Man to Man, the world o’er,
Shall brothers be for a’ that.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I commend the hon. Gentleman on his excellent poetry. I am terribly sorry but we will have to reduce the time limit to six minutes.

9.15 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): As this debate approached, I reflected on one of the first experiences I had when I first stood for election in 2017. It was at a hustings—although they seem to be a dying art in election campaigns, they are still a very important aspect—and I remember being challenged by a guy in the audience about what my party’s policy on immigration was. I gave a very full-throated argument in favour of immigration and why we need it. After the hustings was over, he came up to me and said, “Look, before the public meeting tonight I was intending to vote for you, but because you are so pro-immigration, I can’t.”

It was probably that experience that led me to reflect on how we managed to get into a situation where immigration has become such a hotly contested issue. There is an argument that during the Brexit referendum, leadership on this issue was completely absent from the main political parties. I believe that immigration is fundamentally a good thing, and that if politicians talked about it more, we would be less likely to be in this position. There is a degree of hypocrisy when we speak to some of our constituents. When we talk about immigrants, that means people who come here from Europe, but when we talk about people going to live in Spain, we call them expats. People will complain, “They don’t speak our language when they are on the streets of Glasgow,” but when I go on holiday to Gran Canaria or Tenerife, I do not often hear many British people speaking Spanish, so there is a degree of hypocrisy there.

On the issue of hypocrisy, I want to address very directly the absolute mess that the UK Labour party found itself in this afternoon. The shadow Home Secretary opened the debate by saying that Labour would abstain on Second Reading. It took 135 miles for Jesus and Paul to walk the road to Damascus, but today it took an hour and 35 minutes for the Labour party to make a U-turn on its position. That shows the absolutely nonsensical position that the Opposition have found themselves in—and it is the same with Brexit. If someone is trying to ride two horses, eventually those two horses will give way. What we saw today is the very beginning of that for Labour, and its Members should reflect on that.

We have to be very, very upfront about the benefits of immigration, because if we are not, there will be major challenges coming down the track for us, in terms of not just our economy and our public services, but social care. We know that the number of people with dementia will have increased by about 40% in 12 years’ time, and that means more people in care homes. It is a sad thing, but the vast majority of people that I went to school with do not like the idea of going to work in care homes—of wiping people’s bottoms or serving meals. If we do not confront the reality of our ageing population, we are going to have a very serious problem with regard to our current argument on immigration.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. It is not simply about providing labour; it is also about the taxes that these immigrants will pay, which are needed to fund the social services that so many people rely on.

David Linden: Absolutely. My hon. Friend almost anticipates my next point. We have an ageing population, and people are going to have to be looked after. People
will live for longer and we will need others to fund the tax base that pays for their pensions, so there is absolutely an economic argument for immigration as well.

As I was preparing for this speech, I reflected on the fact that we begin the sitting day in the House of Commons with a prayer in which the Speaker’s Chaplain says:

“May they never lead the nation wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideals but laying aside all private interests and prejudices keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all mankind”.

We stand here at half-past 2 and pray that to God. We say, “Let us take decisions not just to please people but for the right reasons.” In reality, we find ourselves in a position politically in which we are not leading anymore—we are reacting to public opinion.

I make no apology for the fact that I took a very pro-immigration stance at the hustings that night. Tonight, with a German surname, I will walk through the No Lobby and vote against the Bill because I believe in the free movement of people. The sooner that Members get to grips with the challenges coming down the track and the benefits of free movement, the better, because we have serious challenges, and any vote for this Bill would be a seriously retrograde step.

Sir Edward Davey: It has been interesting to listen to the debate, and particularly to speeches from Conservative Members who have said, “We’ve got to get rid of free movement of labour,” but then in the next breath said, “But we really like the EU agricultural sector”, or “We really need them in the horticultural sector in my constituency,” or, “We really need them in hospitality, tourism, construction and care homes.” We have started to see the complete inconsistency of the Government’s and the Conservative party’s argument on this critical issue.

There is only one way in which Brexit will reduce immigration, and that will be if it creates the mother of all recessions, which I think it can. People come to this country to work. The vast majority come to contribute, pay taxes and work in different sectors in our constituencies, making this country great, as they have done over the decades and centuries. To say that they should be treated in the way in which this Bill would treat them is frankly outrageous.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) that, given the need for the people whom this Bill dismissively describes as low-skilled, if we allow them to come here in the horticultural sector in my constituency, or, “We really need them in hospitality, tourism, construction and care homes.” We have started to see the complete inconsistency of the Government’s and the Conservative party’s argument on this critical issue.

There is only one way in which Brexit will reduce immigration, and that will be if it creates the mother of all recessions, which I think it can. People come to this country to work. The vast majority come to contribute, pay taxes and work in different sectors in our constituencies, making this country great, as they have done over the decades and centuries. To say that they should be treated in the way in which this Bill would treat them is frankly outrageous.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Lady is right. The notion of a temporary 12-month work visa for these people is abhorrent. How can we expect someone to go into the care sector and make relationships with the residents in a care home when they have to go after 12 months? How can we expect such people to integrate into the local community? How can we ensure that their training and productivity increases, which apparently we need to do? It is a nonsense approach to these so-called low-skilled workers, and I think that will be shown to be the case during the consultation on the White Paper.

It is argued that the 2016 referendum gave the okay and the mandate for ending the free movement of labour—it absolutely did not. That was not on the ballot paper. I accept that immigration was an issue, but I asked the Home Secretary at the beginning of the debate whether he thought people were voting on immigration or on free movement of labour. Many people did vote on immigration—not necessarily the majority, and not even the majority of leavers—and it was an issue, but the idea that the referendum came down to free movement of labour is nonsense.

It is worth remembering what some of the Conservative Brexiteers were saying at the time. Daniel Hannan MEP, one of the leading Tory Brexiteers, said the day after the referendum result:

“Frankly, if people watching think that they have voted and there is now going to be zero immigration from the EU, they are going to be disappointed.”

He also said:

“The idea of staying within a common market but outside the political integration, I think that is feasible.”

For his punchline, this arch-Conservative-Brexiteer said:

“It means free movement of labour.”

When we are told that the referendum gave a mandate for this Bill, it is simply not true, and the House should not stand for it, because many Brexiteers, including one of the chief ones, said during the referendum that it did not. If we want to protect our communities, our businesses and our economy, and to ensure that our sectors that are crying out for workers get them, we have to reject the Bill.

Let me take the House through three sectors. The first is the NHS. We know of the lies told about spending on the NHS, but what about the fabric of the NHS—the people working in it? There are 10,000 doctors who are EU citizens working in our NHS, and 20,000 nurses and 14,000 clinical support staff. In the past two years, we have had a net loss of 5,000 in the number of nurses from the EU. When we are looking at nursing vacancies of 41,000 in the NHS, how is the Bill going to help the NHS? Do you know what, Madam Deputy Speaker? Just to show that the Government are totally inconsistent and totally incoherent, on page 84 of “The NHS Long Term Plan” there is the wonderful phrase:

“The workforce implementation plan will set out new national arrangements to support NHS organisations in recruiting overseas.”

You could not make this nonsense up, and the Government should be ashamed of themselves. I think about my own constituency. When I talked to the management at Kingston Hospital, their No. 1 concern was this issue. It was not waiting times in A&E or resources, but their staff, the people who are leaving and the people who will not come here because of the nonsense in this Bill.

Let us move on to social care. EU workers already account for 5% of the total adult social care workforce in this country, which is about 1.6 million people. There are 110,000 vacancies up and down the country. How are those going to be filled? Do the Government think that people will be attracted by this
nonsense? I am afraid that, again, it is a real let-down of the British people. The British people will feel betrayed when they realise what has been done in their name.

Let us take the construction industry. The Prime Minister is lyrical about the number of houses we need to build, and she is right, but 10% of construction workers in the UK at the moment are from the EU—$4,000 of them—so how are we going to build the 300,000 homes a year that we currently need if they are not made welcome? I think this is just shocking—a huge mistake.

Interestingly, I think the Government are completely behind the opinion of the British people: opinion has been changing. A recent poll said that 74% of British people are in favour of free movement within the EU. That is not a mandate for the Bill—quite the contrary.

Time is against me, so I will just end by saying that not only is getting rid of free movement of labour a huge historic mistake, but the Bill is a historic mistake. There are so many things wrong with the immigration system—there are no limits on detentions and there is a ban on asylum seekers working, and there is the complete incompetence and incoherence in the Home Office, as I see in my two surgeries every week when I meet people who are the victims of that incompetence—and there is so much to be done, but the Bill does nothing to solve those problems. The immigration system is not fit for purpose, and the Bill will make it worse and unfair. It is bad for our society and bad for our economy, and MPs from both sides of the House should reject it tonight.

9.27 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I guess I should declare an interest. My partner is Danish, my neighbour is Czech and my lodger was French. American Express has its European call centre in my constituency. I helped to push and worked on the legal basis of Erasmus+, I have lived in Belgium and worked in Berlin, and I am an EU citizen with EU rights. At this critical time in our country’s history, it is of course disappointing, but not very surprising with this Government, that the Bill represents another colossal stealing of those rights from many EU citizens who might not happen to be here on the right date or at the right time.

There are many problems with the Bill. It removes the right of EU citizens to enter the UK without the leave of the Secretary of State. Even if the process will be “simple and easy”, it fails to address honestly the open border in Northern Ireland; we will, of course, end up having a diverging EU immigration policy within the island of Ireland. It fails to give assurances against the exorbitant fees that we currently charge many people coming to the UK, and that we might now charge EU citizens. It fails to give reassurances to visitors who may come to the UK but want to change their status, and it might mean that they have to do the same ridiculous run around that non-EU migrants have to do when they have to leave the country of reapplying through a different immigration system and come back in. The system is currently farcical for non-EU migrants, and the Bill will introduce that farce for EU citizens as well.

The Bill moves us to a race to the bottom on migration issues, rather than seeking the best, and that is the problem with it.

I want to draw particular attention to clause 4, which will give Henry VIII powers, allowing the Secretary of State swathes of power to make determinations without oversight by this place. Have we learned nothing from Windrush or the disregard with which the Government treat many migrants? I would not trust this Government—in fact, I would not trust many Governments—with the right to decide on immigration without being fettered by Parliament. How is it appropriate that the Government, who have shown themselves to be so inept, should give themselves these swingeing powers? They cannot be allowed to deny EU citizens their rights in this way.

Of course, things have got so bad generally with immigration. When I write to the Immigration Minister about immigration issues, she does not bother writing back to me; she gets a civil servant in the liaison team to send me a bog-standard, pro forma letter. She will not even engage on the issue. That is what the Minister has come to, and that is what the Government have come to—dispassionate about individual issues, worrying only about the number on the visa or the number of migrants. It is wrong, but now they want to extend that system to others.

My constituents speak of injustice. Last month, a man who had worked here for 20 years—he has an NHS pension and two medical businesses—was rejected for permanent residency by the Government. He was an EU citizen, but despite spending £1,000 on an immigration lawyer to fill in the paperwork, the Government said that the right boxes had not all been ticked. We will appeal that decision, and we will be successful, but he had 23-odd years of national insurance payments. The Government could have looked that up instead of worrying about which boxes were ticked. The Government do not worry about the people when they are what matter.

Many people have lived in the UK for much of their lives, but spent three or four years away working. A German citizen, for example, might have been raised and schooled here but spent the last four or five years out of the country. They will now have to fulfil all the immigration checks, even though they see Britain as their homeland. I was granted EU citizenship in 1992, as were most of us. My brother was born an EU citizen. I fail to see why people who were born with citizenship rights should suddenly have them taken away. If we have to go down this route, we should at least say that everyone who was born before exit date will continue to have EU citizen’s rights for the rest of their lives. That is the only fair thing to do when people are being deprived of their rights.

The other danger is the huge costs we are seeing. It can cost an employer and employee £8,000 if they are coming from outside the EU, with the NHS surcharge alone being £2,000, even though the person will pay taxes and contribute to the NHS. It costs only £127 for the Home Office to process the application, yet the charge for leave to remain is £1,220—a profit of 1,000%. It is disgraceful. The Minister is frowning, but those figures are from the Home Office.

We must vote down the Bill tonight because it is wrong in principle and wrong in practice, and we must stand up for what is right.

9.33 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to make some concluding remarks in this debate and to follow the excellent speech by my hon.
Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) that outlined the problems for EU nationals. I will be joining him in the No Lobby, because the powers the Bill would give to Ministers are far too wide. It feels rushed, and the slogan of ending free movement has become a theme tune for the Conservatives. Apart from that, we have actually seen quite a lot of consensus across the House on the key question of the £30,000 threshold, and I welcome that. In fact, I welcome the tone of the debate, which has been very positive. So many Members, in press interviews and elsewhere, have been calling for the subject of immigration to be debated in a responsible and measured way.

The key areas of the economy mentioned by many Members were farming, food processing and fishing. I would just mention that while fishing is worth about £1.8 billion to the economy, fashion is worth £35 billion. We must put the various sectors into perspective. The other huge sector is the NHS, which many Members mentioned. My own hospital, the Whittington hospital in the west of my constituency, which most of my constituents use, has a 12% to 15% vacancy rate, put down almost entirely to fears over Brexit and uncertainty.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): We have exactly the same issue in my constituency. We have a very large number of NHS workers from the EU who make a significant contribution to our local community. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point and I fully concur. I also support the point she makes about asylum seekers from working results in the most incredible.

Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) mentioned. Preventing asylum seekers working, which my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Ms Harman), has put forward an excellent proposal to end indefinite detention and to bring us in line with European justice systems. Many of us have many objections to the Bill. It appears that, following all the Brexit debates we have had and the various votes the Government have lost, the Government are still repeating the same mistake of giving Ministers incredibly wide powers and not really consulting with Parliament quickly enough. There is the nature of the Bill being rushed and the nature of the slogans around free movement. Finally, there is the short-term visa problem, which we know from hon. Members who have spoken could lead to the possible exploitation of those who are successful in attaining such visas. We need to look much more carefully at the evidence on visas. If short-term visas do lead to exploitation, what evidence do we have from other immigration systems that they actually work?

Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for your indulgence in allowing me to speak despite not being in the Chamber for the whole of the debate.

Mr Speaker: The House has been delighted to hear the hon. Lady. I say that without fear of contradiction. 9.39 pm

Azfar Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): We have heard passionate speeches from Members on both sides of the debate. By my count, 27 Members have contributed. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) raised the issue of immigration in football. I thank the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), and I hope he will continue to work with us in Committee.

A new immigration system must not damage our economy and our society. My speech will cover the four broad areas that Labour’s objections to the Bill fall into.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Abstain or against?

Azfar Khan: We will be against. Is that good enough?

First, the Bill is not a blueprint for a new immigration system, but a blank cheque. It contains broad Henry VIII powers that would allow the Secretary of State to amend both primary and secondary legislation. That point was made by my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who drew on her constituent’s awful case to highlight the importance of parliamentary scrutiny. The White Paper on immigration is not a final draft; it is out for a 12-month consultation. In any case, the Government are not tied to doing what is in the White Paper. The Secretary of State could use the powers in the Bill to introduce an immigration system that is entirely different from anything that has been discussed without parliamentary oversight or scrutiny.

If the Government go with what is in the White Paper, that would spell disaster for our economy and our society. Their own impact analysis points out that the plans would reduce GDP and would have a cumulative fiscal cost of between £2 billion and £4 billion in the
first five years. The suggested short-term visa route would open the door to widespread labour abuses, creating a second class of migrant worker and enormous inefficiencies for businesses. That point was made by the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr).

The Government’s plans have come under fire from their allies, as much as from their critics. The CBI described them as a “sucker punch for many firms right across the country.” The TUC called them “a disaster for every worker.”

The British Chambers of Commerce accused the Government of leaving businesses with their “hands tied”. We will be looking to put sensible limits on those powers in Committee to ensure Parliament has a say on our future immigration system.

Our second big concern is about social security co-ordination. The Government already have the power under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to ensure continuity in social security in the event of no deal. In fact, the Department for Work and Pensions has already tabled a series of negative statutory instruments that do just that. As the Government admit in the explanatory notes, the powers that they are asking for in the Bill would enable them to bring in a new approach to social security. That is a massive overreach and is entirely undemocratic. At least we have an immigration White Paper that indicates the Government’s thinking. We have no idea what they plan to do on social security.

The third issue relates to EU citizens in the UK. Despite the Government’s warm words about how much they value the contribution of EU citizens and want them to stay, there is nothing in the Bill that protects their rights in primary legislation. More than 3.5 million EU citizens in the UK have spent two and a half years under a cloud of uncertainty. The Government have already started rolling back on their promises—for example, not to deny settled status to EU citizens who have not been exercising treaty rights, despite the Prime Minister’s guarantee that that would not happen. Basic fairness to those who have already moved between the UK and the EU, as well as our ability to attract talent in the future, rely on our getting this right.

Fourthly, the problem of accountability and transparency goes far beyond the Henry VIII clauses. The Tories have made it harder and harder to live as a family in this country, and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) made the powerful point that the income threshold disproportionately affected women. The most stark and tragic illustration of this was the Windrush scandal. Let us be under no illusion: the cause of the Windrush scandal was the hostile environment. If we are to avoid a repeat of Windrush for EU citizens, the hostile environment must end. A system cannot be transparent if it is incomprehensible and inaccessible to the average person. The Government must simplify the immigration rules, follow the Law Commission’s recommendations, bring back legal aid and restore data protection.

We find the Bill a missed opportunity to address the moral and humanitarian failures of this Tory Government towards asylum seekers, as set out emotively by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). There is nothing in the Bill, and very little in the White Paper, on refugees and asylum seekers. At a minimum, we must bring an end to indefinite detention and fix refugee family reunion. I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the right hon. Members for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for their cross-party work to end indefinite detention.

In conclusion, on immigration and social security, the Government have not done their homework. They have come to Parliament asking that we grant them extensive powers without any idea what they might use them for. We are not willing to grant the Government such broad powers to introduce as yet unknown rules on immigration and social security. Listening to the debate, it has become clear that Ministers’ intentions are even worse than we had expected, so we will be voting against the Bill on Second Reading.

9.47 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): We have had a good and thorough debate this evening, and many wide-ranging issues have been raised, some of them even included in the Bill. I remember a couple of weeks ago nodding in agreement when the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) spoke of the importance of tone and language when discussing immigration. She was right then, and she was right today, and I thank all Members who have spoken thoughtfully and carefully on this topic in this debate.

The views expressed in this debate demonstrate the interest in the future borders and immigration system and the importance of getting it right. We have also heard from across the House of the great contribution that immigration has made to our society, culture and economy, and the Government value that contribution very much. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary was generous in giving way in his opening speech, and indeed the debate has drifted some distance from the concerns in the Bill, and I want to reflect on the contributions of as many Members as possible.

The end of free movement will allow us to build a system that recognises and maximises all the benefits of immigration, and we will continue to welcome talent from every corner of the globe under the future system.
to the exceptional circumstances of a case the public interest requires deportation. This approach is to be maintained.

Coming to Back-Bench contributions, it seems fair to kick off with my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who mentioned football at length. Of course we welcome the contribution made by sports people to the UK. Our current visa arrangements are designed for elite sports people and coaches who are internationally established at the highest level, and whose employment will make a significant contribution to the development of sport. To support the sector, the Home Office works with recognised sports governing bodies to agree on an objective set of criteria against which elite sports people will be assessed. My hon. Friend made clear the importance of the premier league, not only to our society but to our economy, and I am absolutely committed to working alongside the Football Association and the premier league to ensure that that continues.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) spoke about detention, and specifically about indefinite detention. That issue was also raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman). The hon. Gentleman will be aware that 95% of those who are here without immigration leave are in the community, and I am sure that he will welcome the current Yarl’s Wood community pilot scheme. We are working with 12 women who would otherwise be in Yarl’s Wood to ensure that they are being supported. There is, of course, an automatic bail referral requirement for people who have been detained for four months, and we are now piloting a referral after two months. That will provide the judicial oversight for which so many have called.

The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham spoke passionately about detention. It is seldom that I say this, but I greatly enjoyed the opportunity to appear before her Select Committee, the Joint Committee on Human Rights, a couple of months ago. We had an interesting and challenging discussion about detention, and I hope I convinced her and her Committee that we are thinking very hard about the issue. It is right that we work to make the correct decisions, but detention remains part of our immigration policy. It is important for us to work on the immigration bail pilots and, of course, on detention in the community.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) spoke about the conventional view that we should have one immigration policy for the whole United Kingdom, and I absolutely agreed with what he said.

Sir John Hayes: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Caroline Nokes: I am sorry, but I am not going to give way. I am conscious that I am very time-limited.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) made a point very early in the debate about fairness and language, and about the importance of clarifying asylum with immigration routes. She was, of course, absolutely right. I sometimes find it hugely frustrating when people conflate the terms “asylum seeker” and “refugee” and “economic migrant”. I have said before that we must be careful with our language, and the Home Secretary responded to my right hon. Friend’s intervention with an important observation about language and tone.

I am well aware that there are strong and passionate views about immigration on both sides of the House. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for saying, quite rightly, that we needed to have a mature and constructive debate, but he was also right to draw attention to issues in certain sectors of the economy. With that in mind, we are having a year of engagement on the White Paper, talking to representatives of different industries. My hon. Friend referred to agricultural workers in particular, but also mentioned the hospitality and tourism industry, which is so important to his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) spoke about migration from a non-EU perspective, and said that it was a global issue. She is absolutely right, and in the discussions that I have had with EU representatives—and, indeed, in my discussions last week with French representatives in Calais—they were keen to emphasise that migration could not be seen in isolation. We must look at the root challenges, and work together. When we leave the EU, we will continue to work with our friends and neighbours on the other side of the channel.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said that we were making immigration policy with the slash of a pen, but he was far from correct. I would argue that he was whipping up scare stories when he tried to convey the message that the Government had said that EU citizens were not welcome. That directly contradicted the messages given in the House time and again by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, and indeed by me. We want our EU neighbours, friends and colleagues to stay, and we have not only made the settled status scheme as straightforward as possible, but—as the right hon. Gentleman will now know—have made it free.

The right hon. Gentleman also spoke about asylum seekers having the right to work, and went so far as to suggest that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer was more interested in the subject than I was. I would like to reassure him that just this morning I had a meeting with Stephen Hale from Refugee Action on this subject, and indeed on 24 October last year my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) held a debate on this subject in Westminster Hall, to which he did not contribute.

It is important that we look at the NHS, and several Members, including the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), spoke about NHS workers—nurses and care workers—and it is important that we continue to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure there are sufficient routes into the NHS for those who contribute so much. I am very conscious that there are now 4,000 more EU workers working in our NHS than in 2016, and the hon. Lady will remember that last summer we lifted doctors and nurses out of the tier 2 cap threshold.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) spoke about Refugee Action. She will know that I have a great deal of time and respect for her and the issues she has raised, and I hope very much to
continue learning from her and the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green); they often come as a tag team to give me a very hard time, but they do so with such charm and determination that I am sure we will continue to engage effectively with them. In the same way, through our engagement process we will continue to listen to businesses large and small, sectors like the universities, the National Farmers Union, the Royal College of Nursing and the CBI, which we have been doing to date, because of course the conversation on immigration has not simply started over the course of the last few weeks, but has been going for well over a year.

The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—he knew I would get to him eventually—has spoken at length about voodoo politics. I have tried to take a positive out of something that everyone has said, and, given the headache I took tablets for earlier, I am sure he had his pins stuck into a voodoo doll of me. To add a little bit of levity, however, he would like to hold up Switzerland as an example of how individual cantons can run their own immigration policies, and indeed they can, but I gently draw his attention to the case of Nancy Holten, a vegan anti-cowbell campaigner who twice had her application for a Swiss passport refused by a referendum—we all know how keen we are on those in this place—and I am far from convinced that that is an effective immigration policy.

I am running out of time, but I would like to mention the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who spoke so movingly about his father-in-law the late Sir Reginald Eyre. As for the words of a Whip ringing in our ears, “There’s a vote; don’t you dare”, well, apparently Her Majesty’s Opposition have decided that there is a whip and they do dare.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) has on many occasions had fairly brutal conversations with me and has raised some very important cases, which I will continue to work with her on; she does not shy away from tackling the difficult. She raised the issue of Henry VIII powers and the immigration rules. Of course, historically since the Immigration Act 1971 the immigration rules have been used to firm up immigration policy by Governments of all parties, and we will undoubtedly continue to do so, but if anybody thinks these do not get scrutinised, I would point them to the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who always gives me a very hard time whenever immigration rules make it to a debate in Delegated Legislation Committee.

I fear that I have reached the end of my comments. I welcome the remarks about Rabbie Burns—a little bit of Scottish poetry always goes down well—and I reinforce the message that this has to be an immigration policy for the whole United Kingdom. We have set out powers that will enable us to make amendments to primary and secondary legislation, but that is crucial in ensuring that we align the treatment of EU and non-EU nationals and that UK law can operate effectively.

Let me conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Hove and Wood Green (Catherine West) for raising the tone of the debate. She spoke carefully and thoughtfully, and that makes a huge difference. We want an immigration system that works for the whole UK and we will be continuing the engagement. We will also phase in that system, recognising the importance of giving individuals, business and, indeed, Government, the time to adapt. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 297, Noes 234.

Division No. 306] [9.59 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allen, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
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
Breer, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Craib, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Nigel
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo

Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazey, Lara
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hain, 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 Sir John
Tellers for the Ayes:
Jo Churchill and Wendy Morton

NOES

David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffy, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
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
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hermion, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg

Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheelker, Mrs Heather
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggan, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Zahawi, Nadhim
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Question accordingly agreed to. Bill read a Second time.
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at today's sitting, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of the Motions in the name of Andrea Leadsom relating to Proxy Voting not later than one hour after the start of proceedings on this Motion; such questions shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Andrea Leadsom.)

Proxy Voting

Mr Speaker: We now come to motion 6 on proxy voting, which we will debate together with motion 7. Before I call a Whip to move motion 6, I should inform the House that I have selected amendment (d) to motion 7, which stands in the name of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). The amendment will be debated together with the motions. I am referring to amendment (d), appertaining to miscarriages.

At the end of the debate, I shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of the proceedings. I hope that this is helpful to colleagues. First, I shall put the Question on motion 6, after which I shall call the Leader of the House to move his amendment (d) formally and put the Question on that—the Question on amendment (d). Finally, I shall put the Question on motion 7, either as amended or, as the case may be, in its original form on the Order Paper.

I should make it clear that if amendment (d) is agreed to, I shall ensure that the additional requirement relating to miscarriage is incorporated into the pilot scheme and duly authorised as soon as possible. I must emphasise that this would not delay the immediate implementation of the scheme in the form that has been made available in the Vote Office. I call the Leader of the House to move motion 6.

10.18 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move,

That this House:

(1) reaffirms its resolution of 1 February 2018 on baby leave for Members of Parliament;
(2) endorses the Fifth Report of the Procedure Committee, HC 825, on Proxy voting and parental absence;
(3) accordingly directs the Speaker to prepare a pilot scheme governing the operation of proxy voting for Members absent from the House by reason of childbirth or care of an infant or newly adopted child, pursuant to the recommendations in the Committee's report, this resolution and the temporary Standing Order (Voting by proxy for parental absence);
(4) directs that a scheme prepared in accordance with this resolution and the temporary Standing Order (Voting by proxy for parental absence) shall be signed by the Speaker and the leaders of the three largest parties in the House before it is published, and that it shall enter into effect for a period of 12 months when the Speaker takes the chair on the sitting day after the day of publication;
(5) directs that any amendment of a scheme in effect by virtue of paragraph (4) above shall take effect when the Speaker takes the Chair on the sitting day after a proposal signed by the Speaker and the leaders of the three largest parties in the House is published; and
(6) directs the Procedure Committee to review proxy voting arrangements within 12 months of the commencement of a scheme established by virtue of this order.

This debate follows much discussion of the issue of baby leave and the use of proxy voting over the past year. I would like to start by thanking all Members from right across the House who have helped to bring us to this point. In particular, I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and his Committee for their helpful and rapid response to last February’s debate. Their report has provided the...
means for us to implement these changes and to
demonstrate how Members are helping to bring Parliament
into the 21st century.

I also thank the Chair of the Women and Equalities
Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for
Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and the Mother of the House,
the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and
Peckham (Ms Harman). They have both been strong
champions of proxy voting and have consistently supported
and promoted the many issues that affect women in
this place.

I pay tribute to the collaborative way in which you,
Mr Speaker, have worked with the Clerks to ensure that,
should these motions pass, the proxy voting scheme can
be operational from tomorrow. I am grateful to the
Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the
SNP’s Westminster leader, the right hon. Member for
Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), for quickly
responding to the many questions and other deliberations
in the House on this issue, and in my opinion quite
reasonably, too. Throughout that time, we have seen strong
support for the changes before us today.

I am sympathetic to the issue that the amendment
seeks to address. A miscarriage is a distressing time for
any individual to have to go through. However, those
suffering such distress may well prefer to do so in
private, via the anonymity of the pairing system rather
than the transparency of a proxy vote, during what is
always a personally devastating period. Whether the
amendment is passed is ultimately a decision for the
House.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The proxy voting in
the motion is voluntary—it will not be compulsory for
somebody to take a proxy vote. If somebody wished to
keep such a matter private, they would still be able to
under my amendment. It would just mean that if somebody
wished to take advantage of proxy voting after they had
had a miscarriage, they would be able to do so. I am not
sure that it would breach a confidentiality if the person
concerned did not want it to.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right
in the point he makes. I think I just acknowledged that
myself.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I am
pleased to hear that the Leader of the House is sympathetic
to the amendment on miscarriage. As somebody who
suffered a miscarriage during the 2015 general election,
I think it would have been physically impossible to have
come into Parliament to vote at that time. Could the
amendment extend to male colleagues, who are often
there to support their partners at times of miscarriage?
We perhaps do not often talk about the role of the
expectant father in such cases.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to all the
proposals around the sadness of miscarriages. Having
had two myself, I have some personal experience of the
matter. Nevertheless, I draw all Members’ attention to
the fact that we are here to debate and agree proxy
voting for baby leave, subject to the amendment tabled
by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies),
on the basis of a pilot scheme. The Procedure Committee
will come back to this issue at the end of the one-year
pilot scheme, when there will be an opportunity for all
Members to put forward their views.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I
note that amendment (a), tabled by the hon. Member
for Shipley (Philip Davies), has not been selected for
debate, but does the Leader of the House not agree
that, whether it is considered in the pilot or afterwards,
looking after a partner who is terminally ill is an equally
valid reason for getting a proxy vote?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady makes an important
point. As I say, we have debated the issue in this
Chamber on a number of occasions, which is why we
plan to focus on a pilot scheme. Towards the end of the
one-year pilot, we can look again at whether the issue
should be restricted to baby leave or expanded.

I acknowledge that Members have wished to bring in
slightly different or additional changes to our voting
system, but I definitely do not think that anyone could
accuse us of having rushed into the reforms we are
proposing. Members will, I hope, be reassured that
bringing in proxy voting as a pilot scheme means that
any outstanding issues can be addressed during the
12-month review.

Let me reiterate that ensuring that every baby has the
best start in life has been a personal priority for me for
many years. I am absolutely committed to ensuring that
this Government do all they can to allow new parents to
spend that vital early time with their babies. I am
therefore delighted to be able to bring forward these
motions, and I urge all Members to support them.

10.25 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader
of the House for bringing forward the motions and for
listening to the concerns of hon. Members by expediting
this particular process.

Mr Speaker, you will recall that you commissioned
the report “The Good Parliament”, from Professor
Sarah Childs—she is actually listening to the debate—way
back in 2016. She cited the issue of proxy voting and
said that that would make this a good Parliament. We
have had two debates and two urgent questions on the
matter. The House expressed a view in favour of establishing
a system of proxy voting when my right hon. and
learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham
(Ms Harman) first secured a debate in the House on
1 February 2018, so we are moving quite quickly—it
has taken a year to get the system into gear.

As I set out from the Dispatch Box on 18 July and
13 September 2018, and on 22 January 2019, the Labour
party supports the principle of proxy voting for parental
absence. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Broxbourne
(Mr Walker) and members of the Procedure Committee
for taking evidence and producing its report “Proxy
voting and parental absence” on 15 May 2018.

The Committee recommended that the scope of the
scheme
“should be broadly equivalent to statutory provision for maternity
and paternity leave.”
That was similar to the Clerk of the House’s memorandum, which identified “caring responsibilities limited to mothers of young infants” to cover a category of Member who might qualify for a proxy vote.

The motions are about the implementation of proxy voting for Members absent by reason of childbirth or care of an infant or newly adopted child. The scheme is not, at this stage, intended to be extended to other reasons for being away from the Chamber. The Procedure Committee’s report flagged up the fact that the Parliaments of Australia and New Zealand also have this process—the two processes work in slightly different ways, but they work nevertheless.

I will not go into individual cases, but it is clear that a system of proxy voting for parental absence should be in place as soon as possible. The breakdown in the pairing system and Members having to vote while heavily pregnant have made this a necessity, and it is right that there can be such certainty. Right hon. and hon. Members want to cast their vote and want that recorded. The Leader of the Opposition, who is committed to a modern Parliament, has signed the certificate. I am pleased to say that he was the first of the three main party leaders to do so. I pay tribute to the Clerk of Divisions and Elections, who managed to get the certificate ready to be signed by you, Mr Speaker, in the first instance.

I think that it is helpful to set out what actually happens. To get a proxy, Members can either provide a certificate of pregnancy or a matching certificate to you, Mr Speaker. No further validation is necessary. The maximum duration of a vote by proxy is six months for the biological mother of a baby, or for the primary or single adopter of a baby or child, and two weeks for the biological father of a baby, the partner of the person giving birth, or the second adopter of a baby or child. Eligible Members will need to specify in writing to you, Mr Speaker, the dates on which the absence shall begin and end within these maximum durations, and name the Member who has agreed to carry her or his proxy vote. You, Mr Speaker, will issue a certificate and cause it to be entered in Votes and Proceedings. Members can change who their proxy is, end their period of proxy voting earlier or cast a vote in person by providing a written notice to you, Mr Speaker, as soon as possible, or, at the very latest, by the end of the previous sitting day.

Members casting a proxy vote in a Division will inform the Division Clerk at the appropriate desk and the Tellers at the doors of the Lobby. Members can cast their vote in one Lobby and the proxy in the other, and may cast a proxy without casting their own vote at all. The result of Divisions in Hansard, both online and in its printed edition, will note votes cast by proxy, including the Member who cast the proxy vote. I know that one hon. Member has already signalled to you, Mr Speaker, that she intends to cast her vote by proxy, and she will be able to do this at the end of today, certainly in time for tomorrow’s votes. The new system is set out very clearly and I thank the Clerks for drawing it up.

If the House agrees to motion 6 and the temporary Standing Order, will the Leader of the House confirm—although I think that she has done so already—that the system of proxy voting will be in place by tomorrow? Will she also outline the timeframe for the Procedure Committee’s review and confirm when the clock starts ticking on that review? I hope that it is from today so that we have the full 12 months for it. It is right that this House accommodates everyone who wants to carry out their caring responsibilities. Members who work hard to fulfil their duties on behalf of our constituents deserve always to have their voices heard in our good Parliament.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I call the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), I should just mention that the shadow Leader of the House referenced Professor Sarah Childs, and I wish to record that the great professor is watching over us.

There will be a five-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke has generously signalled to me that she intends her speech to be shorter than that, but she has up to five minutes.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): May I start by offering my congratulations to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on the arrival of her son? I am sure that we would all want to send our best wishes to her.

I will also begin by referencing a certain Professor Sarah Childs, because it was her report in 2016 that concluded that the House of Commons had in the past “lacked the institutional will” to address issues of representation and inclusion. I am sure that Professor Childs will join us today in recognising that things have changed and we have started to consider these matters in a great amount of detail. I pay tribute to the Leader of the House and the Mother of the House, who have done so much on this issue, as well as the Chair of the Procedure Committee and many more who have made today’s events possible.

May I gently suggest to Members that while we can be celebratory, we can also challenge ourselves to do much better? Members have to take responsibility for the modernisation of this place. The piecemeal approach that we are taking to modernisation has driven many of the amendments to the motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), although only one of them has been selected. We need to be better at shaping our vision for the future of what this place should be in totality, rather than simply focusing on one issue at a time. We need to make sure that we do not exclude anybody from standing for election to this place because of their gender, disability, race, religion or sexuality. As an organisation, we have not yet grasped the bigger role that we have to play in picking up the picture that was so eloquently painted by Professor Sarah Childs in her report, which has also been discussed in “The Good Parliament” guide and at the Speaker’s Conference in 2010.

Mr Speaker, you have had a pivotal role in driving forward change in this place, but your enthusiasm for change cannot completely take the place of Members’ support for that change. We cannot simply do this in a piecemeal way. We need to ensure that important questions such as that raised in the intervention of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford)—whether the measure should be extended to people with other
caring responsibilities, particularly for terminally ill family members—are answered before we go much further. If we want a more representative Parliament, with people who have real-life experience, we have to be able to accommodate the needs of that group and we need to encourage those people to join us.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has stated publicly that the House of Commons may well be in breach of its public sector equality duty to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation. The Women and Equalities Committee believes that we have a role to play in providing more scrutiny of the way in which the House of Commons proceeds on equality issues, so I am pleased to tell the House that we have decided to set up a Sub-Committee to look specifically at the scrutiny of equality in this place—yes, holding ourselves as parliamentarians to account over every aspect of the working of this place so that we turn those wonderful words into practice not just in the future, but now. That is a hugely important part of our job. We are the custodians of the future not just for British business and British institutions, but for Parliament itself. We have to live up to those expectations and deliver now.

10.34 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). I very much look forward to her continuing work on and interest in this issue. If anybody can drive through this agenda, it is she and her Committee.

We very much welcome the motions and hope that this will be the very last word on the tortuous process of delivering proxy voting in this House. It is almost unbelievable that it has taken so long. It is almost a year since the first debate, when the House expressed a will and a view that proxy voting should be a feature of our voting arrangements. I have no reason to doubt the Leader of the House’s commitment to this; in fact, I know how solid her commitment is. She has been very sincere and championed this through the House in the course of the past year. I just hope that she has managed to get her Whips Office fully on board with all this now.

As we have heard, the Procedure Committee was charged with bringing forward a solution and designing a way in which that could happen, and that has been duly discharged. I, the Leader of the House, you, Mr Speaker, and the shadow Leader of the House—she has promised to be my proxy if I ever require one, but I gently say to her that I do not think that is going to be necessary—all gave evidence to the Committee. The motions practically replicate everything that was suggested and recommended by the Committee, and this is the way forward.

It has to be said, however, that it has taken a couple of crises for us to get to this position. The first involved the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) and the breaking of the pairing system back in July last year, and then there were the terrible and appalling incidents before this has happened.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to get past the point where we are making policy as a result of being shamed? We had to be shamed into doing this. There were so many debates, and the Leader of the House herself said that she might look at it when we moved out of this place while it was being refurbished. A lot has changed since then, and it is great to see progress, but we cannot let things continue like this.

Pete Wishart: I totally agree. We should make proper plans and make sure that we have the right arrangements in place. I do recall those comments by the Leader of the House, but I will be kind to her—I think that she has played a part in ensuring that this is delivered and made a reality, along with many Members.

We have to conclude that the pairing system has totally and utterly failed this House. The 19th-century “nod and a wink” approach that we had to deal with such arrangements really now has to come to an end. We never, ever trusted the pairing system. We have never participated in any pairing arrangements during my time in the House—almost 18 years—and they must be totally and utterly abandoned.

It is a welcome fact that the motions have been debatable—that was the right way to go. When these proceedings were first proposed last week, there were concerns that somebody might attempt to vote the motions down or talk them out. I welcome the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). I used to gently chide him when he was a new Member, calling him “Dinosaur Jr”. He is now a fully fledged member of the dinosaur community, but his interest just goes to show that even dinosaurs may change their horns. I accept, in the sincerest way, that he has now come forward as a fully fledged, proper member of the community of change in this House. We will support his amendment tonight.

It is great that Professor Sarah Childs is with us tonight, because it was her report that first set out some of the agenda items we needed to look at. We have to make this place a good Parliament. We have to address some of the byzantine ways in which we do our business in this House. I go on and on about the voting Lobbies. They are now thoroughly dangerous and we have to do something about them properly, so let us start to look at that. This is a good start. I can assure the House that my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has already signed the certificate. We will now get this process in place and I welcome it very much.

10.39 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Thank you for selecting my amendment (d), Mr Speaker. There seem to be two things that we need to concern ourselves with today. The first is whether we agree with proxy voting, and the second is whether we agree with proxy voting on the terms in the motion.

I am rather sceptical about proxy voting for a number of reasons, not least that if debates in this place never changed anybody’s mind or made better legislation, we would have to question why we bother having them at
all in the first place. That is a clear part of our role as MPs. What Ministers say at the end of a debate can affect a Member’s vote. Reassurances from Ministers can make a Member take a different line, and that has happened on many occasions.

I am also sceptical because I am not entirely sure that this will deal with the lack of trust in the pairing system. What if the proxy votes the wrong way? What if there is a breakdown in communication? What if the designated proxy is unable to vote, for some reason? This does not mean that there will be none of the same problems with proxy voting as there are with the pairing system. We should not believe that this will be a flawless system. Given that the will of the House is clearly that we should have proxy voting, it is surely incumbent on us to try to make the rules the best we can, and this motion is lacking in a number of areas.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I do not share my hon. Friend’s scepticism, but I do share his attention to detail, and that is lacking in his amendment. He will know that my private Member’s Bill dealing with stillbirths is going through the House of Lords at the moment. I hope that his amendment would extend to women who have suffered stillbirths, who would not be covered by the definition of miscarriage at the moment.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend, and I accept his support in that spirit. If we are going down the route of proxy voting, we have to make sure that it is fair for people in every circumstance. That is the point I want to make. That is why it is important that people who have a serious illness, who are not covered by the motion, are included. Why is the primary carer of someone who is seriously ill less deserving of a proxy vote than those mentioned in the motion? People who have suffered a miscarriage should equally be covered, and I hope the Government will accept my amendment.

We have to look at why fathers and mothers are being treated so differently. The Women and Equalities Committee report, “Fathers and the workplace”, which I think was a unanimous report of the Committee, said that limiting the statutory period to two weeks for fathers is “particularly inadequate in certain specific circumstances, such as where the mother or baby is ill or has been born prematurely.” I agree with that report of the Committee, on which I serve. Members of the Committee seem to have been distinctly lacking in arguing for that to be included in the terms of this motion, despite recommending that every other organisation in the country should abide by it. They seem to think that it should not apply to the House of Commons but should apply to every single organisation.

We have to look at where proxy voting applies, and I hope the Procedure Committee will consider all these things. I do not think that proxy voting should apply to private Members’ Bills, for example, which it does in the motion. Hardly anybody turns up for private Members’ Bills, so it would be rather absurd that someone who never turns up for them on Fridays and never had any intention of doing so will all of a sudden be able to vote in proceedings on them.

The Report of Bills is not really suitable for proxy voting. You might recall, Mr Speaker, that there are sometimes 200 amendments tabled to a Bill on Report in different groupings. We do not know on the day of the vote which ones will be selected for debate or which ones will be voted on. How on earth can a Member give an informed opinion on 200-odd amendments that day when they do not even know which ones are being voted on and which ones will be selected for debate? We should be very wary about extending proxy voting to the Report of Bills.

I must say that there is something distinctly lacking in one of the motions compared with the one in the Procedure Committee report. The Government have missed out one key plank, which I have sought to reinstate, of the report’s proposed motion. It states: “The Speaker may make provision for the exercise of a proxy vote insofar as it is not provided for in this Order.” That had in mind something like miscarriages, which is why I have tabled amendment (d).

Equally, the Procedure Committee report says: “There is an inherent risk to the House’s reputation of Members away from the House casting votes as if they are present in the Chamber and actively following debates. For example, it would be unthinkable”—the word “unthinkable” is underlined in the report—“for a motion on committing military personnel to armed conflict to be carried on the basis of proxy votes.”

Yet that has not been excluded from the motion on proxy votes: sending troops to war will still be covered by proxy votes, despite the Procedure Committee saying that that would be unthinkable.

I hope that the Government will accept my amendment (d) as a modest step forward in trying to make this procedure fairer to everybody, irrespective of their circumstances, and I hope that the Procedure Committee will look at all these matters in the round when this comes up for review.

10.45 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is obviously a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who gave a characteristic speech. I recall my suggestion during the urgent question, when I said that the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) might be seeking a pair for this evening and I thought the hon. Gentleman might have been up for that, but he is here instead. What I would say is that even a stopped clock is right twice a day, so while I disagree with much of what he said, there are none the less some good suggestions for progress in some of the amendments he has tabled.

I am delighted to be here for this debate, as I am that we are having this debate and that we have this very good news. I again thank the Leader of the House for her dogged work behind the scenes, those from the Procedure Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee, and of course the Mother of the House and everybody who has helped to make this happen, which is so important.

I am particularly happy that, tomorrow, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn will be able to vote by proxy. I think she is probably still awake—she has a small baby, so I reckon she is still awake right now—so I would just say, “Tulip, we are so happy for you.
Tomorrow, enjoy little Raphael and making sure your constituents are represented at the same time.” Indeed, I hope that this will go on to be useful for other hon. Members, with the hon. Members for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and for Fareham (Suella Braverman), many more babies are due to be born, and I think this is going to be a really positive step.

One thing I did agree with the hon. Member for Shipley about was the importance of fathers. In the urgent question last week, I was particularly moved by quite how many men stood up and talked about their experiences as dads and MPs, and about the guilt that they feel. I do hope, given that this is a pilot, that that is an issue we can return to as soon as possible. I just think it is not right in the 21st century for us to leave men out of this and say that two weeks is enough; it is not. Dads are incredibly important, which is why we introduced shared parental leave and why we should make sure this applies to men as well.

The hon. Gentleman has tabled an amendment, which seems to command support, about miscarriage, which is also incredibly important. I am fortunate in that I have not experienced miscarriage, but we have heard from hon. Members who have. However, I have had scares involving heavy bleeding. In fact, on one occasion when I was pregnant with Gabriel, I was in the House in the evening, I had just had something to eat and we were due to be voting late on Brexit, and that was when I started to bleed heavily. Anyone who has been pregnant will know how that feels; even though it is not uncommon, the fear strikes that something is going wrong, particularly in the first trimester.

I telephoned my midwife, who advised me to go to accident and emergency, and I went across the bridge to St Thomas’s. It became clear that, by the time I was seen, I was going to miss the vote on Brexit, so I had to contact my Chief Whip and, in doing so, tell him I was pregnant. I had not announced it to anybody yet, so it was not necessarily the circumstances in which I wanted to do that. I was kept in overnight as it happened, and I had a scan and everything was fine—do you know what, I was so delighted that that was the case—and the rest of the pregnancy was good, but that is a not uncommon experience. It is not one where a proxy vote would necessarily make a difference, but I share that because these are the types of experiences that people have when they are pregnant.

I know there will be so many other experiences like that that others have had, which is why a modern workplace ought to be able to accommodate and understand the types of things that people are going through. Of course it did not help that I inevitably received criticism from constituents for not having voted in that Division. I said that I was unwell, but that was not good enough and people still said that I should have been there. If someone has not announced she is pregnant, and in particular if she is worried about having a miscarriage, she really does not want to suddenly tell the world about it.

I hope that we will in future be able to extend this provision to other categories. My right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) has spoken movingly about his first time in Parliament when he was caring for his terminally ill first wife, and others have had similar experiences. In the future, bereavement and other circumstances should be covered, so that this place can be a genuinely modern Parliament.

Mr Speaker: It would help if colleagues could shorten their speeches somewhat, but I am guided by colleagues.

10.50 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I will follow your advice to keep it brief, Mr Speaker. Indeed, this is not an obviously family-friendly time to have this short debate, although as the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) said, many a new mother may be awake doing an evening feed.

I support the motion. I know that women all around the Chamber have been waiting for this moment, to receive the reassurance that when their time comes to give birth, they will not have to worry about coming in to vote or about pairing arrangements. There will also be women watching this debate who will at some time in the future follow in our footsteps and want to know that Parliament is a family-friendly place to work, and that it is possible to come here and be a parent—a good parent. I am often asked by women thinking of standing for Parliament, “Does it work?” I say emphatically, “Yes. It does work to be a Member of Parliament and a mother, it does work to be a Member of Parliament and a father.”

I say that, but my children are a little bit older—they are six, eight and 10. I cannot imagine what it would be like having a baby as a Member of Parliament and thinking that you might have to go in to vote. Of course, as others have said, we have the pairing system, and that has worked well for many people, but it is not foolproof. It does leave you with a level of uncertainty and it also means you cannot represent your constituents in the way you would like. The time has come to move on, and we have the proxy voting proposals that have been worked through carefully so that we can have this pilot.

I, too, feel that the proposals do not go far enough. I would like to see us doing more for dads beyond the two-week period. I have spoken to colleagues who have come in to vote in the weeks that their wives were giving birth, not knowing whether they would be able to get back in time for the birth. I remember when I was in the three weeks leading up to my due date asking my husband not to travel for work, because you never know when the baby will come.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Just as a point of information, we should be mindful that there will be women who will be married to, or have partners who are, women so the impact will be not only on fathers, but on mothers whose wife or partner is giving birth.

Helen Whately: I completely agree, and in fact I was trying to make sure I used broad enough language.

We must make sure that we are thinking of dads and, in future, two weeks may prove not to be long enough. We must also think in the future about people who are seriously ill or have caring responsibilities for someone who is seriously ill. That is very much for the future. Let us get on with what we can do now. I fully support the introduction of proxy voting now.
Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): My baby was born on 14 April 2017, and four days later my baby was born. From July to December 2017, I was absent for the vast majority of votes in Parliament. I came in for a handful of votes, and I want to take the opportunity to put on record my thanks to both Whips Offices. There has been some airing of the problems that others have had in this debate, but some people are new to the party as I do not remember them taking part in the two debates and several urgent questions we have had. There is a bit of what-aboutery going on.

Let me be clear about why pairing is not enough. I want the right to have a baby and be able to represent my constituents. That is the simple answer. A second part of the answer is that some of us are suffering and have suffered reputational damage just for daring to have a baby and wanting to be a Member of this House. I was branded by a national newspaper as having the second-worst voting record in Parliament. I was not asked before the publication of the article why that might be the case, so I did not have a right to reply. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) was branded as one of Britain’s laziest MPs in Parliament.

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Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): The hon. Lady and I were on the same Select Committee. Does she believe that being on maternity leave ought to be recognised for those serving on a Select Committee? I, too, was attacked by people locally for looking as though I was missing when I was simply on maternity leave.

Emma Reynolds: We have to think about all these issues. I think the Leader of the House has made the right decision to pilot the scheme on the basis of the detailed recommendations of the Procedure Committee, but we do need to look at these issues. We were lucky, being on the same Select Committee. In a way we paired each other on many votes, but that was just a coincidence. We need to think about other roles in the House, but let us not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

For me, any system is better than pairing. For example, a proxy voting system that does not let me express an opinion on a Friday, when I probably would not be here anyway, is fine thank you very much. A proxy voting system that says if we vote on military intervention I would have to come in and I would not have a proxy vote on that occasion is also fine by me, thank you very much. Anything that is better than having my name trawled through the mud because I have been off for six months and nobody has asked me why is a move in the right direction. We have to iron out some of the difficulties in the pilot, which will take place for a year. I do not think for a minute that after the pilot this progress will be rolled back. I hope it will advance.

I would like to say something about the role of fathers. We have legislated in this Parliament for shared parental leave. The Procedure Committee looked at that in its recommendations. In the pilot, we are going to have six months for mothers and two weeks’ paternity leave for fathers. Once we have had this pilot, we should look at extending it. It is a crying shame that so few dads take up shared parental leave. If an hon. Member were to take that leave and set an example, it would send a very strong signal to dads out there that it is culturally and financially okay to do so. I know there are many barriers preventing dads from taking up leave. As an aside, I would like to thank my husband for taking shared parental leave early, so that he could help me to fight an election campaign. I also thank his employer for letting him do so at short notice. We made use of it and I urge other dads to do the same.

Finally, I would like to say huge thanks to you personally, Mr Speaker, for your commitment to this, to the Leader of the House, to the shadow Leader of the House, to the Chair of the Procedure Committee and all its members, to the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, and, above all, to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who pushed this issue when it was not a popular thing. People were saying, “What about this, what about that and what about the other?” My right hon. and learned Friend, the Mother of the House, with her characteristic determination, just went through with it and kept on going. She has brought so many people on board. Tonight, we are sending a strong signal to young women up and down the country that they can be an MP and combine that with being a parent, so please come and stand. Sending that strong signal is what tonight is all about.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I commend the Leader of the House and the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) for pursuing this proposal. I also commend the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who is not with us but will perhaps be the first gainer from it.

This proposal is overdue. Unlike my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) who wants radical change quickly, I am an incremental reformer of the House because reform of the House has unexpected consequences. This proposal, however, is overdue. It is overdue because pairing is obsolete. As the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) made plain, in today’s politics being absent is not good enough. Whatever the real reasons, the public will not forgive us for not being there, so it is absolutely necessary that we put this measure in place and keep it after the year is up. I have no doubt that that will be the outcome.

There will be issues, some of which my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) raised. His concerns are not always popular in the House, but some of them are real. Quorum will be a serious issue on Fridays and so on, so we must deal with that. I agree entirely with his amendment on miscarriage. That should go nem con, as it were. He raised the issues of serious illness, irrespective of who the Member is, of being a primary carer for somebody who is seriously ill, and of the death of a close relative. The public will see it as necessary that we address those issues to maintain the fairness of this proposal. It is important that, in the public eye, we maintain the view that this is a fair and
sensible proposal. I say to the Leader of the House that, although there will be a one-year review, I hope we will look at those issues before the year is up.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend, I strongly support these proposals. To support the immediate point he is making, two years ago today is the day that I went into hospital, and as some Members know, I was in a coma for 11 days, during which time I missed the Second Reading of the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, which attracted the kind of criticism that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) referred to. Although it is difficult to know quite how I could have appointed a proxy in those circumstances, does my right hon. Friend agree that we must ensure that, when people are ruled out of participating in parliamentary affairs, they can still represent their constituents?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is entirely right. It is important, in this context, that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater—that is a terrible metaphor, now that I think about it. The simple truth is that we must retain our ability to do our job in a way that the public accept is fair, sensible and effective.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very powerful case. Having three children, I fully support this move to help with maternity, but I want to make the case for people with relatives who are seriously ill or have died. At the moment, it is unbelievably stressful, because one has to wait to be with that person to see whether somebody on the other side of the House is also in the same boat so one can be paired.

Mr Davis: That is the last intervention that I will take, Mr Speaker, because I will finish in about 10 seconds.

This is a massively important issue and I hope we will carry it nem con tonight, but we must understand that this will not be the end of the reform. It will lead to a series of reforms that are right and proper for this House and will improve our Parliament.

11.3 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. It is heartening that so many colleagues from both sides of the House have waited until 11 pm to participate in this important and historic conversation. There is a historical perspective on this. Members may not be aware that until 1868, according to “Erskine May”, Members had the opportunity to have a proxy vote in the House of Lords, and there were also proxies in our medieval Parliament, so in fact we are reinstating an age-old tradition.

To bring us back to the present day, it is just a few weeks until the arrival of my second child. A colleague said in jest that I am sitting here in self-interest. Let me be very clear that this change cannot come quickly enough for my constituents and for what we can and should be doing on behalf of the country.

If this motion does not pass tonight, I will continue to do what I did last time. When I had my first child, I came back to the House for some urgent votes. Colleagues might recall seeing me sitting in the Lobbies breastfeeding my baby when they were less than three or four months old.

I did so until 11 pm one evening in the Tea Room. That is not the best environment for a new-born, although I would do it again if I had to. At this critical juncture for our country, it is important that no Member on either side of the House should have to make that choice and be here only for certain votes.

I echo the point that colleagues have made about the example we set. We legislate for maternity and paternity rights, and in 2019 we should be leading by example. The fact that we rely on an informal pairing system that depends on the Whips is not acceptable. I also echo the important point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds). I did an interview on television earlier, although I will not embarrass the presenter who made this just about mums. As has been said, this is not just about mothers; it is about dads, too, and I hope that after this year-long trial we can make further strides to extend it beyond the two-week paternity leave—important though that is—to cover shared parental leave. Having secured that in the House, we should be leading by example and having it here too.

In conclusion, I thank the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, your good self, Mr Speaker, and the Procedure Committee for being impatient that this has taken so long. There have been steps on the way that have urged it along. We should not have to choose between our responsibilities as Members of Parliament and our responsibilities as parents. The two really can go hand in hand. If we are serious about making this a place that welcomes people of all ages and backgrounds and about encouraging people to consider standing for public office, and particularly if we are serious about addressing the gender imbalance we still see, this move will make a really big difference. I hope the House supports it tonight.

11.6 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): As Government Chief Whip, I had responsibility for managing the pairing system, so it is a matter of some regret to me to listen to the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) explaining his absences. If a Member is ill, they may wish to be transparent about it, but often Members cannot be here because of family
circumstances—children, parents or other family members—and we should be conscious of the need to enable them to be absent in a way that does not force either them or their family members to put into the public domain the reasons for their absence.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): It is important to stress that no one has to take a proxy vote; it will always be voluntary, and Members could continue with the pairing system. Like other Members, when I was on maternity leave, the campaigning group 38 Degrees emailed my constituents and said, “Where was Rachel Reeves?” The answer was I was on maternity leave with a very young baby, but it did not bother to check its facts. Many of my constituents thought I had just not bothered to turn up.

Mr Harper: The hon. Lady’s experience just confirms what I have thought for many years about 38 Degrees and the way it campaigns against Members. I have always found that robust pushback and setting out the facts to my constituents have been very helpful. I take her point seriously. I would caution only that as we look at the results of the pilot, we should bear in mind that there are many circumstances in which colleagues may need to be absent, sometimes for reasons that they do not wish to share, and that no one in any other workplace would ever have to make public. I want us to ensure that we do not implement a system that makes it more difficult for people to keep private things that should remain private.

Just in practical terms, if the pairing system is to work, we need enough colleagues who are not here to be available to pair with. The hon. Lady was right to say that no one would be forced to use the proxy voting system, but if we end up with proxy voting it will become increasingly difficult for pairing to proceed, and colleagues may therefore find that they are forced to use the system in circumstances where they do not wish to draw attention to the fact that they are not able to be here. That is the only cautionary note that I wanted to add to the debate. I am very supportive of the specific proposals.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith), What a fantastic way to end our debate: a speech about the importance of dads. Sometimes there is something on which we can all agree, and the importance of dads is one of them.

I share the pleasure of many Members at the fact that the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) will—we hope—be able to use the first proxy vote tomorrow. It may be the first time since the 19th century, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) mentioned, but it certainly will not be the last. This is fantastic news for Parliament, and it is something that we can all get behind in our attempts to make ours a modern workplace to which more people from more diverse backgrounds, of different ages and at different stages in their lives, will feel proud to come to represent their constituents.

I hope that all Members will support these motions, and prove that when we really get together we can do great things.

Question put and agreed to. Resolved.

That this House:—
(1) reaffirms its resolution of 1 February 2018 on baby leave for Members of Parliament;
(2) endorses the Fifth Report of the Procedure Committee, HC 825, on Proxy voting and parental absence;
(3) accordingly directs the Speaker to prepare a pilot scheme governing the operation of proxy voting for Members absent from the House by reason of childbirth or care of an infant or newly adopted child, pursuant to the recommendations in the Committee's report, this resolution and the temporary Standing Order (Voting by proxy for parental absence);
(4) directs that a scheme prepared in accordance with this resolution and the temporary Standing Order (Voting by proxy for parental absence) shall be signed by the Speaker and the leaders of the three largest parties in the House before it is published, and that it shall enter into effect for a period of 12 months when the Speaker takes the chair on the sitting day after the day of publication;
(5) directs that any amendment of a scheme in effect by virtue of paragraph (4) above shall take effect when the Speaker takes the Chair on the sitting day after a proposal signed by the Speaker and the leaders of the three largest parties in the House is published; and
(6) directs the Procedure Committee to review proxy voting arrangements within 12 months of the commencement of a scheme established by virtue of this order.—(Andrea Leadsom.)

PROXY VOTING (TEMPORARY STANDING ORDER)

Motion made, and Question proposed,
Voting by proxy for parental absence (Temporary Standing Order)

(1) A Member may, by reason of absence from the precincts of the House for childbirth or care of an infant or newly adopted child, arrange for their vote to be cast in accordance with this order by another Member acting as a proxy (a proxy vote).
(2) A proxy vote may be cast:
(a) in a division in the House, in Committee of the whole House, or in any legislative grand committee, in relation to the business specified in paragraph (3) below;
(b) on business specified in paragraph (3) below recorded in a division under Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions), and
(c) in a ballot cast in an election under Standing Order No. 1B (Election of Speaker by secret ballot), Standing Order No. 2A (Election of the Deputy Speakers) and Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs).
(3) Subject to paragraph (4) below, a proxy vote may be cast on all public and private business of the House.
(4) No proxy vote shall be cast in a division on any motion in the form specified in section 2(2) of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.
(5) No proxy vote shall be reckoned in the numbers participating in a division for the purposes of (a) Standing Order No. 41(1) (Quorum), and (b) Standing Order No. 37 (Majority for closure or for proposal of question).
(6) A proxy vote may be cast only if the Speaker has certified that the Member for whom the vote is to be cast is eligible under the terms of this order and the Resolution of the House of Monday 28 January and if that certificate, including the name of the Member nominated as a proxy, has been published in the Votes and Proceedings.
(7) A vote cast by a proxy shall be clearly indicated as such in the division lists published under the authority of the House.
(7A) The Speaker may also make provision for the exercise of a proxy vote for Members who have suffered a miscarriage.
(8) This Standing Order shall lapse upon the expiry of the proxy voting scheme established under the terms of this order and the Resolution of the House of Monday 28 January.

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House signalled this, but for the avoidance of doubt and the sake of clarity, following the decision of the House on motions 6 and 7, as amended, I wish to make a brief statement.

As has already been alluded to during the debate, the pilot scheme that I am directed to prepare has been signed by myself, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the parliamentary leader of the Scottish National Party. The scheme, colleagues, will be published this evening and will therefore indeed have effect from tomorrow.

I also confirm that I expect my first certificate of eligibility to be published in the Votes and Proceedings for today, enabling a proxy vote to be cast tomorrow.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118 (6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (INSOLVENCY)

That the draft Insolvency Amendment (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 19 November 2018, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)
Question agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to. Ordered.
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)
That the draft Interchange Fee (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 22 November 2018, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CONSUMER PROTECTION)
That the draft Consumer Protection (Enforcement) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 4 December 2018, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 30 January (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CIVIL AVIATION)
That the draft Air Services (Competition) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)
That the draft Market Abuse (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 6 December 2018, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)
That the draft Credit Rating Agencies (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 30 January (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (MERCHANT SHIPPING)
That the draft Ship Recycling (Facilities and Requirements for Hazardous Materials on Ships) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

School Exclusions and Youth Violence
Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

11.19 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this extremely important debate to the House. As I hope that the Minister and other hon. Members are aware, I am chair of the cross-party Youth Violence Commission. I established the commission in 2016 as a response to an alarming increase in deaths among young people in my constituency, in London and across the country. We published our initial policy recommendations in July 2018.

I have called many times in the House for the development of a public health policy to tackle violence, and I was pleased that the Government and the Mayor of London committed to that approach at the end of last year. The commission is now working hard to ensure that those words turn into action, and I am pleased that the Mayor of London has established a violence reduction unit similar to that adopted in Scotland to develop this approach. I am still waiting to see what the Government are doing. As part of its ongoing work, the commission is starting to flesh out some of its individual policy recommendations. I would like to use the debate to focus on recommendation No. 4 from our report, which is about boosting support in schools. More specifically, I will be examining the relationship between exclusions and violence, and the role of pupil referral units and alternative provision.

This is in no way intended to be an anti-PRU debate. During my time with the commission, I have seen some brilliantly run PRUs that achieve great outcomes for many of their students. However, I believe that we need a radical re-think of how funding is organised so that we can prevent the need for PRUs in the first place.

I hope that the Minister has had time to read the commission’s report for himself, as the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) clearly had when she responded to my Adjournment debate on the role of youth services in tackling violence. I was pleased to see in today’s press that she continues to stand up for vulnerable young people by criticising her Government’s delay in introducing a law to make it illegal for sports coaches to have sexual relations with 16 and 17-year-olds in their care.

The number of pupils being permanently excluded from schools is on the rise. Between 2012-13 and 2016-17, the number increased by 67%. Referrals to children’s services when gangs are identified as a factor at assessment rose by 26% between 2015-16 and 2016-17. During the same period, hospital admissions for under-18s who had been assaulted with a sharp object rose by 20%.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady has brought an important issue to the House for consideration. The stats show that 72% of parents think that when their child is excluded from school they are at risk from youth violence. This suggests that there is real concern among parents about the problems that follow exclusion from school. Does the hon. Lady agree that that concern must be addressed to ensure that there is life and a place to go after exclusion?
Vicky Foxcroft: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Therein lies one of our problems: when kids are seen to be excluded, they are not only excluded from school; they can sometimes feel like they are absolutely excluded from society as well.

To go back to my point about figures and statistics, I believe that this is incredibly concerning, particularly given that the Government’s own serious violence strategy recognises school exclusions as one of the risk factors for involvement in serious violence.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate and her generosity in giving way. Analysis was done of 60 serious cases of youth violence in Croydon, and in every case, that child was outside mainstream school. We also have in Croydon a situation that is mirrored elsewhere: some schools seem to exclude huge numbers while others tend not to exclude at all. The disparity makes it clear that something has gone wrong, so does my hon. Friend agree that we need to consider what Ofsted and other organisations can do to try to stop so many exclusions happening in certain schools?

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. The work in Croydon has been fantastic at identifying the need to follow the evidence, and the evidence clearly points to the link between school exclusions and youth violence. It is important that we continue always to follow the evidence.

I know of 10 young people in my constituency who have been killed as a result of youth violence since I was elected in 2015, and we know about those cases only because they have been reported in the press or the families have contacted me. It should not come as a surprise to Members that certain groups of children are more likely to be excluded and end up in alternative provision settings. According to the Institute for Public Policy Research’s 2017 report “Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion”, excluded pupils are many times more likely to come from a vulnerable background compared with the general student population in England. They are 10 times more likely to suffer from mental health problems, seven times more likely to have a special educational need, four times more likely to qualify for free school meals, and twice as likely to be in the care of the state.

What about the outcomes for those young people? The commission’s research has shown that it is difficult to separate out pupil referral units from data on all alternative provision settings, which include those that provide education for children who cannot attend a mainstream school for other reasons. However, the data that we do have makes for depressing reading. In 2016-17, only 4.5% of children educated in alternative provision settings achieved a 9-to-4 pass—an A to C in old money—in GCSE English and maths. By comparison, of the mainstream school population in England, 72.4% achieved a pass in English literature and 70.7% in maths.

Reintegration into mainstream education may also be used as a measure of success. However, the Education Committee’s 2018 report “Forgotten children: alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions” suggests that it “is often not a possible outcome for pupils, with some schools being reluctant to reintegrate pupils.” Although some PRUs provide support for pupils who are reintegrated, that does not apply across the board. When pupils are reintegrated without such support, schools can struggle to keep them in school, and they are likely to return to alternative provision. Once they leave the pupil referral unit, the picture remains bleak.

A 2012 Ministry of Justice study found that 42% of prisoners reported having been permanently excluded from school, with the figure rising to 63% for temporary exclusions. That provides a stark contrast when compared with the less than 1% of the general population in England who end up in prison. The same Education Committee report found that 94% of year 11 pupils from a mainstream or special school go on to sustained education or an employment or training destination, compared with 57% from alternative provision. That has had the knock-on effect that pupils from alternative provision face limited choices when they leave education.

Of course, it is not inevitable that pupils who have been excluded will go on to become involved in serious violence and crime. However, we cannot ignore the link between school exclusion and social exclusion. Once children and young people are permanently excluded, it is difficult for them to re-enter mainstream education. That means that they are more vulnerable to grooming by criminals and to becoming the victims or perpetrators of violent crime.

What are pupil referral units costing us? The answer is not entirely straightforward. Each place receives £10,000 of central Government funding, but that is topped up by local authorities to varying degrees, depending on each individual’s needs. In answer to a written question, the Department for Education told me that it estimates the average per-pupil cost of alternative provision, including PRUs, to be £17,000 nationally. By way of example, the average cost of a place at Abbey Manor College, the PRU local to my constituency, is £18,000, which is £1,000 a year more than the average cost of a place at a private school in 2018, and almost three times the cost of a state secondary school place in the same year.

As part of our research, the Youth Violence Commission held five evidence sessions. At the third of these we heard from experts, teachers, practitioners and, most importantly, young people themselves about the vital role that education can play in the prevention of youth violence, but what shape should that role take? Our interim report made five recommendations in this area. The first, and perhaps the most important, was for a long-term aspiration of zero expulsions from mainstream education and a reallocation of funding away from PRUs towards support and earlier intervention in mainstream schools. In order to achieve that, schools must be properly incentivised to keep pupils on their books.

The launch of Ofsted’s consultation on its new framework for the inspection of schools and colleges offers some hope that things may be starting to move in the right direction. The proposals aim to address concerns that education has become too narrowly focused on exam results, and schools that push pupils in order to meet targets as a practice known as off-rolling—could now risk being punished by inspectors. However, it is clear that a great deal remains to be done if we are to achieve this necessary shift in focus.

The Youth Violence Commission’s report also recommends an overhaul of the way in which careers advice is delivered in schools to ensure greater inclusion,
greater emphasis on high-quality sex and relationships education, and better integration of support services such as school nurses, social workers and mental health professionals.

Once we had our recommendations, we needed to test them on the professionals. Earlier this month I met representatives from five teaching unions. I have to admit that I had expected some push-back against the commission’s recommendations. Teaching, as we all know, is already a demanding and stressful job, and I feared that the unions would view the recommendations as putting more pressure on their already overworked members. Well, I am pleased to report that I could not have been more wrong. I learned that there is huge appetite and enthusiasm for teachers to be able to do more to help vulnerable pupils. However, they simply lack the time and resources.

Four main strands came out of our discussion, the first of which is that we need to learn from what worked in the past. In 2002, the Labour Government set up the behaviour improvement programme as part of their street crime initiative. The programme targeted 34 local authorities that had some of the highest crime rates, and worked with two to four secondary schools in each area and their feeder primaries. The programme’s behaviour and education support teams provided a full range of specialist support to vulnerable pupils.

The same Government’s “Every Child Matters: Change for Children” agenda was launched in 2003 to promote the wellbeing of children and young people. Ministers wanted to ensure that every child had the support that he or she needed to stay healthy, to be safe, to achieve economically, to make a positive contribution to society and to enjoy life. That is not unreasonable, as I am sure the Minister would agree.

Healthcare practitioners, social workers, early years practitioners and other agencies shared information about vulnerable children. The child was central to their plans, and partners regularly worked with them in an attempt to achieve the best possible outcomes. Sadly, the coalition Government brought those programmes to an end in 2010.

Secondly, the union representatives suggested that pupil referral units should play a greater part in early intervention and prevention. In the past, PRUs engaged in inreach work with mainstream schools to try to prevent exclusions from happening in the first place. Unfortunately, that is no longer happening due to funding cuts, which mean that PRUs are able to perform only their statutory minimum duty.

I made an intervention on last week’s Adjournment debate secured by the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on funding for pupil referral units to raise this point about funding for inreach work. Although the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), went some way towards addressing it, I hope that the Minister for School Standards might be able to give a fuller response today.

The third point that came out of the consultation meeting was the need for inclusive accountability. It was suggested that schools should be held accountable for every student who walks through their doors in year 7.

Although that might cause some problems with schools refusing to take perceived “problem” pupils in the first place, it would address the problem of off-rolling in GCSE years in an attempt to improve results. This clearly links with the proposed changes to the Ofsted framework I mentioned. Finally, the unions highlighted the need to build resilience in young teachers, especially regarding how to cope with behavioural issues and violence. Behaviour management should be a higher priority in teacher training programmes. At present, trainees are given inadequate guidance on how to support and manage behaviour.

In conclusion, I am asking the Department to consider conducting a fundamental review of how funding for alternative provision is best spent. As I stated earlier, the Youth Violence Commission’s findings ultimately point towards achieving zero exclusions, but we note that this is a long-term goal and that smaller steps need to be achieved along the way. Primary school teachers frequently tell me that they can identify which of their pupils are likely to be involved in future violence. The current system is failing too many of those children and simply has to change.

I will finish with a few words from one of the young people who attended our evidence session:

“I didn’t get a lot of support at school. I just got moved from place to place and I didn’t have a mentor to be able to talk about my problems with. I basically grew up in prison—I went when I was 15.”

I hope that the Minister agrees that that is categorically not the outcome we want for our vulnerable young people and that he will be able to address some of the points I have raised.

11.36 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) on securing this debate and on her speech, and I pay tribute to her for her work as chair of the Youth Violence Commission.

Over the past year, too many young people have lost their lives as a result of violence, including 14-year-old Jaden Moodie just a few weeks ago. Tackling this issue is a priority, and we know the impact of these tragic incidents is devastating for both the families and friends of those concerned. This is not a matter that can be tackled in isolation, which is why the Serious Violence Taskforce was established by the Government in April 2018. Chaired by the Home Secretary, it brings together cross-party MPs, police leaders, local government and the voluntary sector with the aim of ensuring that sustained and decisive action is taken against violent crime.

The Government’s serious violence strategy, published in April 2018, signals a step change in the Government’s approach. It is focused not solely on law enforcement, important as that is, but on a multi-agency approach across a number of sectors, such as education, health and social services. Early intervention and prevention are at the core of the strategy, which is why the Home Office has established the early intervention youth fund. Through the fund, 29 local projects in England and Wales have been awarded a total of £17.7 million over two years to divert children and young people away from violent crime.
Schools play an important role in the safeguarding of pupils. Schools and colleges, including alternative provision, to which the hon. Lady referred, have a statutory obligation to safeguard and promote the welfare of their pupils. The Department has clear guidance in “Keeping children safe in education” and “Working together to safeguard children”. They set out what schools and colleges should and must do to implement their obligations, and how agencies should work together to ensure the welfare of children. The Department has worked with the Home Office, the police, Ofsted and the Health and Safety Executive to produce new school security guidance, which makes explicit reference to the serious issue of knife crime. We have also created a resource for teachers, so they can raise awareness about the dangers of knife crime among young people. This complements the national knife crime media campaign that has been launched, #knifefree, to raise awareness of the consequences of knife crime.

Equally crucial in safeguarding children and young people is the role of social care. Evidence from joint targeted area inspections of local authorities, health and police has shown that children who have grown up neglected and vulnerable to exploitation as adolescents. That is why the Department is improving the quality of children’s social care services, including through an £84 million investment in strengthening families and protecting children, as well as establishing a new national response unit to help local authorities to support vulnerable children at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation, including through county lines and other forms of gang involvement and sexual exploitation.

James Cleverly (Brantree) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) on securing this Adjournment debate and on the tireless work that she has put into driving forward the work of the youth violence commission. Does my hon. Friend agree that education, local government and health all have a part to play in diverting young people away from serious violence, and that although the Ministry of Justice makes the savings when we divert young people from prison and criminality, we should look into some way to recycle the savings back into those areas of serious violence, and that although the Ministry of Justice makes the savings when we divert young people from prison and criminality, we should look into some way to recycle the savings back into those areas of Government upstream of the problem, so that we can keep young people safe and out of trouble?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That is why the taskforce was established in the first place: to make sure that we were not operating in silos and that those sorts of funding issues did not prevent the action that we know needs to be taken.

Children who need help and protection from social care—those with a social worker—not only lack safety and stability but often have very poor educational outcomes, including being more likely to be excluded than other pupils. The children in need review aims to understand what works to help those vulnerable children to reach their potential.

Let me move on to the important issue of pupil behaviour and the related matter of school exclusions. The Government are committed to ensuring that all teachers are equipped with the skills to tackle the serious behavioural issues that compromise the safety and wellbeing of pupils and school staff, as well as the low-level disruption that too often gets in the way of effective teaching. It is vital that all schools are safe and disciplined environments. There is more to be done, though, which is why the Government are investing £10 million to create behaviour hubs to facilitate the sharing of best practice in classroom and behaviour management. We have also strengthened teachers’ powers to discipline pupils. Teachers can now take action on poor behaviour that takes place outside of school. We have also clarified teachers’ powers to use reasonable force, they have stronger powers to search pupils for items that could be used to cause harm or break the law, and they can now issue same-day detentions.

Parents also have a fundamental role to play and are often well placed to support schools with the early identification of any problems that may be influencing a child’s behaviour. The special educational needs and disability code of practice, for example, sets out that schools should work with parents to identify any underlying problems that might be related to behavioural issues. Any form of violence in schools is unacceptable. Schools’ behaviour policies should set out how poor behaviour, including incidents of violence, are dealt with. Should the incident constitute a criminal offence, the school should of course report it to the police.

All children have the right to a school environment that is safe and conducive to education, and the Government and I fully support headteachers in the use of exclusion where it is warranted. Exclusion on any grounds other than behaviour is unlawful, but it is for the headteacher to take the decision based on the evidence available and the need to balance the interests of the excluded pupil against those of the whole school community. There has been in recent media coverage some misinforming of fixed-term exclusions with permanent exclusions. The statutory guidance on exclusions makes it clear that, in all cases, a decision to permanently exclude a pupil should be taken only in response to a serious breach or persistent breaches of a school’s behaviour policy, and if allowing the pupil to remain in school would seriously harm the education or welfare of others in the school. But exclusion from school must not mean exclusion from education. When a child is excluded, suitable full-time education has to be arranged from the sixth school day of exclusion.

There are differences in exclusion rates between schools, between different local authority areas of the country, and between pupils with different characteristics, despite all state-funded schools in England operating under the same exclusions framework. That is why last spring the Government launched an externally led review of exclusions practice, led by our former colleague Edward Timpson, which is due to be published shortly. This will examine the factors that drive those differences, and also explore and evaluate best practice for those where the disparities are less significant.

Regarding the potential links between exclusions and crime, which the hon. Lady mentioned in her opening remarks, it is correct that children who have been excluded from school are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. A recent study found that 23% of young offenders sentenced in 2014 to less than 12 months in custody had been permanently excluded from school prior to their sentence date. However, while there is some correlation between exclusion and crime, we do not have evidence to suggest a causal link. What we do know is that there are children who face difficult circumstances, where complex and multiple vulnerabilities

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can damage their outcomes, falling behind others from the early years onwards. Of pupils in 2016-17, approximately one in 10 needed a social worker over the previous six years. Of these, 35% also had special educational needs, 42% also claimed free school meals, and 17% faced all three disadvantages. The compounding impact of these children’s vulnerability on their educational outcomes can be entrenched by poor experiences in education, including exclusion.

The Ministry of Justice did publish some analysis last June that looked at the educational background of young offenders who had committed a knife offence, and it was not possible to identify whether there is an association between exclusions and knife possession offending. Although a higher proportion of offenders had been persistently absent or excluded from school, only a very small proportion committed the knife possession offence shortly after being excluded from school. Around 74% of offenders committed the offence more than one year after being permanently excluded.

As I have said, exclusion from school must not mean exclusion from education. Alternative provision is the system that is in place to educate those pupils who are unable to attend mainstream school. This could be for a variety of reasons, be they behavioural or following on from exclusion. There are some excellent examples of alternative provision that not only have high standards for behaviour, progress and attainment, but have strong interventions in place to support their pupils at risk of involvement in crime. For example, London East AP—LEAP—has an ethos of high expectations on pupils’ results, outcomes and behaviour. It does not accept an excuse culture among staff and pupils. That type of alternative provision is not necessarily widespread across the country, and we are determined to make sure that every alternative provision setting is as good as the best in the country and that the best practice is shared. That is why we are taking forward an ambitious programme of reform of the AP system over the coming months and years, which we believe will deliver sustained improvement.

As we set out in our vision document published last March, our objective is to make sure that the right children are placed in the right alternative provision, that they receive a high-quality education and that they achieve meaningful outcomes after leaving alternative provision.

In conclusion, I want to assure the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford that this Government are determined to do everything they can to break the deadly cycle of violence that devastates the lives of individuals, families and communities. In doing this, it is vital to develop a truly effective, multi-agency approach to tackle the root causes of violence. We must continue to work together, so that every young person is safe and free to fulfil their potential, away from violence.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.48 pm

*House adjourned.*
House of Commons  
Tuesday 29 January 2019  
The House met at half-past Eleven o ’ clock  

PRAYERS  
[Mr Speaker in the Chair]  

Oral Answers to Questions  

TREASURY  
The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—
Economic Growth: Yorkshire  

1. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in economic growth in Yorkshire. [908864]  

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): There are 200,000 more people in employment in Yorkshire and the Humber today than in 2010. Unemployment has fallen by over 45%, and it is currently the second fastest growing jobs market in the UK. Since 2010, nearly 70,000 more businesses have been created, and the region has seen growth of 21%.

John Grogan: In the light of figures produced by the Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence, which suggest that growth in Yorkshire and the Humber has been less than 1% since 2010, whereas it has been over 3% in London, is it not time for Ministers to start talking seriously to the 18 Conservative and Labour local authority leaders who advocate One Yorkshire devolution, with transitional arrangements in South Yorkshire and elsewhere?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is reviewing the proposals of the One Yorkshire consortium. It is our priority—I think it is a reasonable one—that the Sheffield city region and its mayor is taken forward and that the mayor is able to fully perform his functions on behalf of the people who elected him a year ago. We have said that the purpose of devolution is to create a mayorality around a functioning economic geography. It is not clear that that case has yet been made by an historic county of the scale of Yorkshire, but we will continue to consider the proposals.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): One scheme that is vital in my constituency for promoting economic growth is the Shipley eastern bypass. The Secretary of State for Transport has visited twice and made it clear that he supports the scheme and would like to ensure that it is implemented. Will the Treasury ensure that he has the funding to make the Shipley eastern bypass a reality?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend and I have discussed the Shipley eastern bypass on several occasions. We have put a record amount of money into our strategic roads network. By hypothecating vehicle excise duty, the amount of money available for road spend in the second road investment strategy period will be almost 175% of the previous period, which is a substantial increase in investment in our roads.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Centre for Cities report published yesterday shows that there is low productivity in York but also serious levels of underemployment. What are the Government doing to address underemployment and ensure that we get the maximum benefit for our economy?

Robert Jenrick: Through our productivity plan, we are investing more in the skills base in all parts of the country, whether that be through apprenticeships, the national retraining scheme or raising standards in our schools. We are also investing more in our infrastructure. Over the last four years, there has been a 50% increase in public investment in infrastructure in Yorkshire and the Humber compared with the last four years of the Labour Government. The hon. Lady and I met recently to discuss her plans in York for the high street and improving the city centre, which we wish to support.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that well-run city regions are the key drivers of productivity and prosperity and that Yorkshire’s economy is best served by devolution to the city regions of Sheffield, Leeds, Hull and York?

Robert Jenrick: We are seeing mayors across the country driving their regions’ economic strategy, including great mayors like Ben Houchen in the Tees Valley and Andy Street in the West Midlands. We want to see more mayors, but we have to be mindful of the original purpose of devolution, which, as my hon. Friend said, is the role of cities and their immediate hinterland in driving productivity and economic growth.

New Business Creation  

2. Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage the creation of new businesses. [908865]  

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The UK is one of the best places in the world to start a business, and a new business is being established every 75 seconds in this country. The Government champion entrepreneurship by keeping business taxes low and helping entrepreneurs to access the finance they need.

Will Quince: New and growing businesses in Colchester such as Ryza Media, Three Wise Monkeys, Heavenly Desserts and Beer Me Now are helping to drive our local economy. How will measures such as the start-up loans programme, cutting business rates by a third and entrepreneurs’ relief further encourage entrepreneurs in Colchester to thrive?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend has named some of the measures that we have recently brought forward to support entrepreneurship in all parts of the country. At the recent Budget, the Federation of Small Businesses declared it the most business-friendly Budget ever, and rightly so. We have extended the start-up loans scheme, helping an extra 10,000 entrepreneurs to get the capital...
they need, and with that—along with our reductions in business rates and with entrepreneurs’ relief, the seed enterprise investment scheme, the enterprise investment scheme and reductions in corporate taxes, including for small businesses—we are creating the most globally competitive tax regime to support those who create jobs and enterprise in our country.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Data suggest that new businesses struggle in areas where communities do not have free access to cash. As of this month, the mother town of the Potteries, Burslem—a town of 20,000 people—no longer has access to a free-to-use ATM. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can work together to fix this?

Robert Jenrick: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady. We are continually pressing the Payment Systems Regulator and the LINK organisation, which manages the ATM network, to ensure a good supply of cash in all parts of the country. We recently issued a call for evidence at the Treasury to give greater consideration to how we can maintain that supply as we move to an increasingly cashless society and protect those who are vulnerable and harder to serve, perhaps including the hon. Lady’s constituents.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Minister will know that Essex is the county of entrepreneurs. How are the Government supporting more small business creation, alongside new housing schemes such as the garden settlements that are proposed for the great county of Essex?

Robert Jenrick: I concur with everything my right hon. Friend has said. This is of course a country of entrepreneurs. All our most recent statistics have shown that the UK is attracting entrepreneurs from around the world. We are the third leading destination in the world, after the US and China, for inward investment. That is not happening by accident; it is happening as a result of the pro-business policies of this Government, creating the most globally competitive tax regime and investing in our productivity.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): In its report on small business, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee drew attention to the need for consistency of advice for small businesses and those starting small businesses. In Rugby, that is provided by the growth hub, as part of the local enterprise partnership. Does the Minister agree with me that it is important that these bodies are properly resourced?

Robert Jenrick: We do agree with that. All the evidence suggests that small businesses would benefit from better quality advice across a range of areas. Recently in the Budget, we have supported extra funding for networks, to bring businesses together, and we are working across the Government to think about ways in which we can improve the quality of advice and increase competition within business advisory services.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister should take some advice from someone who has been in the House a long time: bragging about being an “every 75 minutes” Minister is very dangerous. I have just checked and in Huddersfield it is cloudy but not cold, but the economic temperature is freezing: start-ups are not starting, the new creative businesses are putting everything on hold, and until they have some reassurance about Brexit, they will not move.

Robert Jenrick: If the hon. Gentleman wanted to give greater certainty to businesses in his constituency, he would support the deal. He did not do so in the recent vote, but I hope he will come forward and do so shortly. I would not be so negative about the business community and the state of the economy in Yorkshire. We have record levels of employment, the jobs market is the second best in the country and real wages are rising. In Yorkshire, real wages and household disposable income are rising above the national average.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Small and medium-sized businesses are the bedrock of Stirling’s economy and the engine of the UK economy. What is being done in practical terms to help those businesses find the funding that they need to scale up?

Robert Jenrick: We have made a number of interventions in this space, because as my hon. Friend says, while the UK is generating record numbers of start-ups, there is evidence that we need to help businesses to scale up and achieve their full potential. We launched the patient capital initiative, and we put £2.5 billion behind the British Business Bank to help small businesses in all parts of the country, including Scotland, and it is making good progress.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am pleased to let the Minister know that in the next financial year, 90% of businesses in Scotland will pay less in business rates than they would if they were elsewhere in the UK. Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), it is important that new firms have access to banking and lending facilities. What is the Minister doing to encourage banks to lend to businesses?

Robert Jenrick: We are taking a range of steps to ensure that banks are able to finance small businesses. For example, as I have just described, we are establishing the British Business Bank, which is supporting tens of
thousands of businesses across the country, including many in Scotland, and helping to ensure that finance is available. The venture capital sector is vibrant and maturing in all parts of the country—not just the areas traditionally associated with venture capital, such as London, Oxford and Cambridge—and helping those businesses to scale up.

Kirsty Blackman: The news that Santander is to close 15 branches across Scotland will leave firms across the country without access to basic banking services. When did the Treasury become aware of that news, and what action has it taken to protect those services and those jobs in our local communities?

Robert Jenrick: We have taken action already to ensure that banks, including Santander, work more closely with post offices, so that there are always banking services available in all parts of the country. We give post offices over £50 million in financial support a year to help keep branches open, particularly in rural and harder-to-serve communities.

Lowest Paid: Earnings

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase earnings for the lowest paid. [908866]

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase earnings for the lowest paid. [908867]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The national living wage was introduced by my predecessor. It will rise to £8.21 from April this year. In total, it will have delivered a pay rise of over £2,750 for a full-time minimum wage worker since its introduction in 2016. While we are proud of that achievement, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) will know that in the long term, sustainable pay growth relies on improving productivity. That is why we are investing heavily in infrastructure and are delivering a national retraining scheme to ensure that people are equipped for the technology revolution ahead.

Vicky Ford: What steps are the Government taking to make sure that everyone, including those on the lowest incomes, has the opportunity to save for their future?

Mr Hammond: The Government are committed to supporting savers at all levels of income and at all stages of life. In September 2018, we introduced Help to Save, which is targeted at people on low incomes and which Martin Lewis of moneysavingexpert.com described as “a very clever scheme” that “enables people possibly to have the best of both worlds”. It pays a 50% bonus on savings of up to £50 made by working families on low incomes. We have 80,000 accounts open already, and we expect the numbers to rise substantially over the next few months.

Neil O’Brien: My constituency has a quarter more businesses and 6,700 more people in work than in 2010, and Harborough district has seen the fastest growth in wages anywhere in the east midlands over the last five years, but we cannot rest on our laurels. To accommodate 230 more jobs, Harborough District Council is building a new “grow on space”. Will the Chancellor come and visit it once it is complete?

Mr Hammond: The sting was in the tale. I am delighted to welcome the new jobs that have been created in Harborough through the action of the council, no doubt with strong encouragement from my hon. Friend. The Government are keeping taxes low and are helping start-ups to access the support that they need. That is why 3.4 million new jobs and 1.2 million more businesses have been created since 2010. With regard to his generous invitation, as I visited his constituency and had the pleasure of seeing what was going on there only very recently, if he does not mind, I will offer it to one of my team.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): Given that the Government’s own analysis shows that every region and every nation of the country will be poorer under any form of Brexit, does the Chancellor really believe that the lowest paid will be better off as a result of us leaving the EU?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady’s statistics are wrong. It is not right to say that every region will be worse off. Every region under every scenario will be better off. The UK economy will continue growing. [Interruption.] The UK economy will continue growing. There is no doubt, as the published cross-Government analysis shows, that leaving with a deal will best protect the UK economy and will be in the interests of all our constituents. I urge the hon. Lady to get behind the deal.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Given what the Chancellor has said, why do large numbers of families in my constituency have to go to food banks? Many of them are on universal credit. Working families are having to use food banks in my constituency. What is he doing for them?

Mr Hammond: The measures we have taken to increase the national living wage, combined with the increases in the personal tax allowance, mean that a single person on national minimum wage will be £4,500 better off in terms of take-home pay than they would have been in 2010.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The Chancellor has actually already answered my question. What assessment has he made of the effect on the lowest pay of meeting our manifesto commitment to cut personal allowance a year early, which in effect has almost doubled the tax-free allowance under the Conservatives?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right and we are proud of that record. From 2015, 1.7 million of the lowest paid will be taken out of tax entirely and a typical basic rate taxpayer is £1,205 better off in terms of tax paid than in 2010-11. As I have just said, when we combine that with the changes to the national living wage, that is a £4,500 a year increase in take-home pay—8% in real terms, the largest increase across any part of the income distribution.
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Westminster has repeatedly failed to support Scottish National party demands to introduce a real living wage, ban unpaid trial shifts and extend rights to those in the gig economy. If Westminster will not act, when will employment law be devolved to allow the SNP Scottish Government to boost the wages of the lowest paid in Scotland?

Mr Hammond: As I have just said twice, we have substantially increased the national living wage and reduced the amount of tax that people on low incomes are paying. With regard to the question on the gig economy, the hon. Gentleman will know that my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is currently reviewing proposals for introducing additional employment protections to those in this sector of the economy.

Leaving the EU: No Deal

5. Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on consumer prices of new non-tariff barriers in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Last year, the Government published a comprehensive assessment of the impact of our departure from the European Union, covering four different scenarios and looking at the effect on GDP and GDP per capita on exports and imports. That analysis is available on gov.uk.

Stephen Timms: The British Retail Consortium estimates that if we leave the EU without a deal, new non-tariff barriers will add on average 29% to the cost of food imports from the EU, on top of new import duties on food. The Chancellor was surely right in his call to business leaders to argue for no deal to be taken off the table. Will he continue to press the Prime Minister to do so?

Mel Stride: What we will continue is our extensive planning for the possibility of a no-deal, day-one exit to make sure that our ports are indeed flowing and goods are moving, including food. But the best way to ensure that we have the right conditions for UK consumers is to back the deal that has been negotiated with the European Union.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, we would immediately be able to eliminate VAT on domestic fuel and reduce tariffs on foods imported from outside the European Union to zero?

Mel Stride: This country will achieve a range of additional flexibilities when we are outside the European Union. We will, of course, assess them all in due course, taking into account the fiscal costs of some of the measures that my hon. Friend has raised.

20. [908883] Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The CBI and many others have warned that leaving the EU with no deal will exacerbate existing regional economic inequalities. The north-west alone is predicted to lose £20 billion a year in a no-deal scenario. That will, of course, impact jobs, not least the 350,000 that are linked to EU exports, 14,000 of which are in my constituency of Oldham East and Saddleworth. So will the Chancellor and the Government as a whole once and for all rule out a no-deal Brexit scenario, which would harm the country as a whole and particularly my constituents and the north?

Mel Stride: The simple reality of the situation that Parliament finds itself in is that, in the event that we do not conclude a deal successfully with the European Union, this country may well leave without a deal. I urge the hon. Lady, in order to address the concerns that she has rightly raised in this House, to get behind the deal.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the Government have no plans for any new non-tariff barriers and call out the British Retail Consortium’s recent “Project Fear” comments? Will he also confirm that it is within the Government’s power, after we leave, to reduce tariff barriers and tariffs on food and clothing?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises two issues. On non-tariff barriers, we have made it very clear that we will implement a solution in the event of no deal, for example, that will be as friction-free as possible. But there will be requirements in that scenario for us to handle pre-custom declarations and various checks, which will come with having a border under those circumstances with the EU27. On our tariff policy, we will come to that in due course.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Stockpiling by business is at its second highest rate since 1992. The Treasury suggests that new customs paperwork for no deal would cost UK business £13 billion. When will the Minister’s boss, the Chancellor, stop arguing privately against no deal’s staying on the table and publicly take on the scorched-earth fantasists in his own party?

Mel Stride: The questions I have just responded to are in a similar vein and all lead back to one conclusion, which is that, if we are to avoid a no-deal scenario, there has, by definition, to be a deal that is agreed with the United Kingdom. We have a very good deal that the Prime Minister has negotiated and will be negotiating further with the European Union. It sees us respecting the outcome of the 2016 referendum but, most importantly, making sure that flows across our borders are as frictionless as possible.

Leaving the EU: Scotland

6. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Scotland on the economic effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU customs union and single market.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The Prime Minister’s deal delivers the ability to negotiate free trade agreements with third-party countries and to protect trade with the EU. So I suggest that the SNP backs the deal, rather than try to stop Brexit.

Patrick Grady: Will the Minister confirm that we do not actually know any of the full economic effects because the Treasury has not conducted an economic
analysis of the Prime Minister’s deal? On that basis, can it really be the Government’s view, as the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary told me a couple of weeks ago, that other European countries will be looking enviously at the UK’s position?

Elizabeth Truss: It is an absolute cheek for SNP Members to claim that there is an issue with our deal, given that they want to break up the UK. Some 61% of Scotland’s external sales are actually to the rest of the United Kingdom.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): In Scotland, goods exports to non-EU countries are higher than those to EU countries, so does my right hon. Friend agree that because of the trade deals that this Government are seeking to strike, Scotland will benefit from that growth?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is correct. Of course, Scotch whisky is one of our flagship exports right across the world. We have the opportunity to renegotiate some very high tariffs and make it even more of a bestseller.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Government’s deal was rejected by a record vote in the House. Business leaders in Scotland and across the UK want the Government to rule out any prospect of no deal, and the Chancellor told business leaders that that was possible, so why have the Government not ruled out any prospect of no deal?

Elizabeth Truss: It is important that we keep no deal on the table to get a better deal from the EU. I strongly encourage the hon. Gentleman to support our deal as the best way to take no deal off the table.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Quite clearly, the Union of the UK is vital to the prosperity of Scotland and the border area. Does the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that Government initiatives, such as the borderlands growth initiative, also make a vital contribution to the prosperity and success of the region?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The borderlands deal is an important way of stimulating growth across the border area, although it would also help if the Scottish National party Government followed through in Scotland on things such as the tax cuts we have introduced elsewhere in the UK.

Deficit Reduction

7. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What progress his Department has made on reducing the deficit since 2010. [908870]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): In 2010, the Government inherited from Labour a deficit at a post-war high. Since then, owing to decisions the Government have taken and the hard work of the British people, the deficit has reduced by about four fifths and is forecast to be just 1% of GDP by 2021-22. The Government’s balanced approach is ensuring that debt is falling while also supporting vital public services, keeping taxes low and investing in Britain’s future.

Stephen Metcalfe: I am sure the Chancellor will join me in celebrating the fact that for the first time we are starting to see a sustained reduction in our overall debt. Does he agree that the worst thing we could do is hand over the levers of our economy to the Labour party so that it might leave us yet another toxic inheritance to clean up?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. The public finances have reached a turning point. This is the first time in 17 years that we are not borrowing for day-to-day expenditure. Debt has peaked and now begun to fall—its first sustained fall in a generation—and the last thing we want is for the hard work of the British people to be thrown away by the incompetence of a Labour Government delivering higher debt and higher interest payments, which they always do.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have a cross-departmental assessment of the medium to long-term effects of different Brexit outcomes, which the Government have published. The Bank of England, because it is better equipped to do so, has made an assessment of the short-term impacts of leaving the EU under different scenarios, which it has published.

Mr Hammond: The Government have made a cross-departmental assessment of the medium to long-term effects of different Brexit outcomes, which the Government have published. The Bank of England, because it is better equipped to do so, has made an assessment of the short-term impacts of leaving the EU under different scenarios, which it has published.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): You’re the Chancellor of the Exchequer. You should have made it yourself.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is a cerebral denizen of the House. I know he is arguing the toss about what he thinks is the inapplicability of the personal views or the professional opinion of the Chancellor, but he should not offer a lecture from a sedentary position. We are accustomed to hearing this eloquence when he is on his feet. We do not need to hear him when he is in his seat.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The next most important update on the deficit will be the Office for Budget Responsibility’s statement around the time of the spring statement, which they always do. The OBR is basing its forecasting work on the same scenarios, which it has published.

Mr Hammond: Yes I can. My understanding is that the OBR is basing its forecasting work on the same assumptions it used at Budget 2018, but, as my right hon. Friend has asked me, I can inform the House that the spring statement will be made on Wednesday 13 March.

I remind the House that it is not a fiscal event but that, as I have said before, if the economic or fiscal outlook changes materially, it is always open to us to turn it into one.
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): World-class connectivity is vital to tackling the deficit, but the Treasury’s decision to stop investors in community benefit societies receiving 30% tax relief could undermine the good work of broadband pioneers such as Broadband for the Rural North—B4RN—in Cumbria. Given that B4RN has reached the parts of Cumbria that the Government and BT could not or would not reach, what assessment has the Chancellor made of the effect of that decision, and will he think again about his damaging proposals?

Mr Hammond: I am not familiar with the case to which the hon. Gentleman has referred, but obviously we want to encourage the delivery of high-speed connectivity in all areas, including rural areas. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to write to me with the details, I shall be happy to look at them and respond to him.

18. [908881] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we would be paying off the deficit even more quickly if companies such as Starbucks and Amazon paid a fair share of tax? Is that a point that he might be willing to make to their bosses next time they get on the phone to him to complain about Brexit?

Mr Hammond: We have taken a large number of measures to ensure that all companies pay the appropriate amount of tax, and we have closed a significant number of loopholes that have been used to avoid corporate tax in the past. My hon. Friend will understand that I cannot discuss individual taxpayers at the Dispatch Box, but of course the Government want to see every taxpayer paying the appropriate amount and contributing fairly to the support of our public services.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Bonkers, Mr Speaker. Let me add, respectfully, that I am referring not to you, Sir, but to the response of the Resolution Foundation’s director to the Chancellor’s £6.2 billion corporation tax giveaway. Even the adviser to the previous Chancellor says that the cut represents poor value for money, and the danger is that it will slow progress in reducing the deficit. If the Chancellor is giving away £6.2 billion, does he accept that it would be better given to, for example, cash-strapped local councils, rather providing handouts for cash-rich corporations?

Mr Hammond: The Labour party will have to get its act together, and organise a discussion between its Front Benchers and its Back Benchers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): You ought to get your act together.

Mr Hammond: Well, I know where the deep divisions lie. [Interruption.] We have heard many Opposition Members express concern about a lack of investment and the potential relocation of businesses, but now the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) has popped up on the Front Bench suggesting that we hit business with an additional tax charge. Labour is the party that is proposing to increase corporation tax for businesses, including the smallest in our country. We will remain the party that is encouraging businesses, large and small, by ensuring that ours is an attractive jurisdiction for investment to take place.

Peter Dowd: Not content with his Government’s manic drive—and there was an example of it—to turn Britain into a bargain basement economy, the Chancellor is splashing out billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money to prop up a no-deal Brexit. Will he come clean and admit that the hard Brexit for which he is reluctantly preparing may lead to increased borrowing, more debt and the widening of the deficit, not to progress in reducing it?

Mr Hammond: Some might think it a bit rich for Labour Members to lecture us about increasing deficits and debt, given that their stated policy is to increase the deficit and the debt. Let me be frank with the hon. Gentleman. He has seen the analysis that the Government have published. If we leave the European Union without a deal, yes, it will lead to an increased deficit, and it will lead to an increase in the debt. That is why the Conservatives are working to ensure that we deliver the deal that will protect the British economy. What I do not understand is why Labour Members who genuinely fear a no-deal outcome do not get behind the solution.

New Hospitals: Capital Funding

8. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What plans the Government have to make capital funding available for new hospitals.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We have committed £3.9 billion of capital investment by 2023 to transform and modernise NHS buildings. We are also increasing the NHS budget by 3.4% a year, while keeping taxes low for working people.

Robert Halfon: Despite the hospital having outstanding staff and the extra moneys that have gone to Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow, the building is in a very bad state and not fit for purpose and we desperately need a new hospital. Will my right hon. Friend use the moneys from the excellent £20 billion extra money for the NHS and work with the Health Secretary to make sure that we get a new hospital for Harlow?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. In December, we allocated £9.5 million to the Princess Alexandra Hospital to help to improve the emergency care pathway, but I recognise that there are further issues. Of course we are in discussions with the Department of Health and Social Care and these issues will be looked at in the spending review.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is not just about capital spending; it really is, in relation to acquired brain injury, for instance, also about making sure we have enough people to follow on from the work done in the new trauma centres to make sure there is proper neuro-rehabilitation and local authorities have enough money to provide decent housing for people. Will the right hon. Lady look at this in the round? Will she make sure that we are not letting people down? We can have as many wonderful hospital buildings as we want, but in the end we need people to treat people.
Elizabeth Truss: That is one of the reasons—rising demand—that we have put extra money into the NHS: up to £20 billion per year. But as part of the spending review we will be looking across the board to make sure that services are integrated and we are investing to get the best possible results for people.

**Child Poverty**

9. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What plans he has to tackle child poverty.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We are working to tackle the root causes of poverty by getting people into work and giving children the best possible education. A record number of children are now in working households and there are 630,000 fewer children in workless households than there were in 2010.

Kerry McCarthy: A number of Members have been involved in the children’s future food inquiry, and we have heard some shocking stories recently about children going to school hungry, packed lunches consisting of maybe two slices of white bread with nothing in between and worse stories. What is the Treasury doing to help the UK to meet the sustainable development goal on zero hunger because it seems at the moment that it is doing very little?

Elizabeth Truss: I point out to the hon. Lady that 1 million fewer people are now in absolute poverty than in 2010, including 300,000 fewer children, but of course we continue to look at the best way to help children in school—I know that the Department for Education is looking at this—to make sure that children are properly nourished.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Treasury could tackle child poverty, attack the bureaucracy and help lower-paid workers across the economy in the UK by raising the level at which people begin to pay national insurance contributions as well as tax, thereby assisting local people in the economy across the United Kingdom.

Elizabeth Truss: We are working to make sure that those on the lowest incomes keep more money in their pockets, so at the Budget we increased the amount working families will be getting on universal credit by £630 and we cut basic rate tax, to the benefit of £130, for families on those incomes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) wishes to shoehorn his inquiry into the question of which we are treating now, it is a very neat fit.

12. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree that the effective marginal tax rate of 73% for one-earner married couple families with two children at 75% of the average wage is too high and should be brought down to the OECD average of about 33%?

Elizabeth Truss: One of the reasons we introduced UC was to make sure that work always pays and we have been continually working to make the system better, reducing the taper rate. Of course we continue to look at that as we roll it out.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): For heaven’s sake. In the last two years of the Labour Government, the number of children living in absolute poverty fell by 400,000. In the next seven years of Tory rule, it fell by only 100,000. At this rate it is going to take 28 years for the Tories to achieve what Labour achieved in two, and one and a half centuries to end child poverty, even without this Government’s blooming Brexit disaster. Does the Minister not understand—this ain’t success, or doesn’t she care?

Elizabeth Truss: If we are going to trade statistics, at the end of the last Labour Government, 20% of young people were unemployed and 1.4 million people were on welfare and left on the scrapheap. We have record employment and the lowest unemployment since the mid-1970s. The way we are going to solve the issue of poverty is to help people get on, help people get into work and get our education levels up.

**Leaving the EU: No Deal**

10. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What recent contingency plans he has made to prepare for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Leaving the EU with a deal remains the Government’s top priority, but as a responsible Government we are, of course, also making preparations to ensure that the country is ready for every eventuality across all sectors of the economy. I have made substantial funding available to prepare for the UK’s exit from the EU in all scenarios. HMRC has written on no-deal preparations to 145,000 EU-only traders, and the Government have produced a partner pack to support stakeholders in preparing for a no-deal scenario.

Sir Desmond Swayne: And worth every penny, isn’t it? How much in total is the Chancellor spending on delivering the people’s decision?

Mr Hammond: Let me put it this way: since 2016 I have made more than £4.2 billion available for EU exit planning, and funding for the 2019-20 financial year has now been allocated to Departments. That is funding to prepare the Government for leaving the EU in any scenario. In addition, I have made arrangements to ensure that Departments and the devolved Administrations can fund measures to address urgent civil contingencies in a no-deal scenario.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Chancellor has rightly made very clear his determination to avoid a no-deal Brexit. How in practice does the Treasury distinguish between those no-deal preparations that have enduring value for money and those that will have been wasted in the event that he is successful?

Mr Hammond: Some of the expenditure being undertaken by Departments will be required in any case for our post-EU future, whether we leave with a deal or
no deal, but I have made no bones about the fact that some of the expenditure is of a precautionary nature. The expenditure will be nugatory if the deal is agreed and we leave with a smooth trajectory. Every responsible Government, across all areas of activity, undertaken expenditure to deal with potential contingencies, to ensure that the country is prepared for eventualities that may arise. It is proper that we should do so.

Mr Speaker: We are running out of time, so we need one-sentence questions.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Deal or no deal, one deal that is really working is the nuclear sector deal. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is a hugely important venture in the south-west and that we should support and encourage it? So far, it has put £900 million into the south-west economy.

Mr Speaker: That was absolutely hopelessly long.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend demonstrates ingenuity and she is absolutely right: the nuclear sector deal is very important.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Some £16 billion to £20 billion of private sector investment has been taken out of north Wales because of the suspension of the nuclear project. Will the Chancellor meet me and other MPs from north Wales to discuss the north Wales growth deal, which was put in place before that dreadful announcement?

Mr Hammond: Obviously, we are disappointed by Hitachi’s decision to suspend work on the Wylfa project, but we have not given up hope. It retains the site and we hope that the work we are doing on a possible alternative financing model may yet allow the project to go ahead, but I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Leaving the EU: Economic Forecasts

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on the Bank of England’s forecasts for the economy after the UK leaves the EU.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): On 28 November, the Bank of England published analysis on how the short-term impact of leaving the EU could affect the Bank’s ability to meet its objectives for monetary and financial stability. That analysis is published independently and reported to Parliament, but in line with normal practice, no comment will be made on discussions between Ministers.

Wes Streeting: The Bank of England knows that no deal will be a disaster, and so do Ministers and the Chancellor, yet the Prime Minister is whipping her MPs to vote today for an amendment that will make it more likely. What does that say about the Chancellor? Does the continued presence of no deal on the table speak to his lack of influence, his lack of authority or his lack of courage?

John Glen: I very much regret the hon. Gentleman’s tone. As he knows, the reality is that the best way of avoiding a no-deal scenario is to get behind the Prime Minister’s deal and vote for it.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I was contacted this week by a constituent who runs a business in Derry/Londonderry. He writes:

“The official position is that”

the recent bomb attack

“is nothing to do with Brexit; everyone I’ve spoken to finds this laughable—it is everything to do with Brexit. The danger, irresponsibility and absurdity really comes home to you when the bomb disposal Land Rovers are screaming past our office.”

What does the Chancellor think the implications of Brexit will be for jobs in Northern Ireland, when local employers feel like this?

John Glen: I very much recognise the risks associated with no deal. That is why the Government are very clear, as the Prime Minister will set out shortly, about the imperative for the House to come behind the deal and vote for it.

2019 Loan Charge

13. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If he will take steps to prevent the 2019 loan charge from being applied retrospectively.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The loan charge is not retrospective. The schemes that were entered into and to which the loan charge relates have always been defective—they never worked, including at the time when they were entered into. That has been evidenced by a number of court cases, including one put before the highest court in the land, the Supreme Court.

Mr Carmichael: Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is allowed to go back to 1999 to look at tax records. Records that it can look at include those in otherwise closed years. If that is not retrospective, I do not know what it is. What word would the Minister use to describe the loan charge to my constituent, who tells me that he started a business working in the oil and gas industry, living in Orkney but working across the globe, doing everything the Government would want him do? How does he now find himself facing bankruptcy, before his 29th birthday?

Mel Stride: An important principle lies at the heart of the whole debate around the loan charge, which is that individuals should pay the tax that is due. If they enter into arrangements that basically mean they disguise income as a loan that they have no intention of ultimately repaying—money that is, more often than not, routed via low or no-tax jurisdictions overseas, via a trust, then brought back into the United Kingdom by way of payment—the Government believe that that is wrong, and the tax should be paid.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What assessment has the Chancellor made concerning an immediate suspension of the loan charge and all settlement discussions within an appropriate period, to allow the loan charge review to be properly conducted and any recommendations to alter the legislation to be implemented?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend will know that the loan charge was brought into effect in 2016. It allowed three years for individuals to clean up the loans—if they were
loans, they could be refinanced on a proper, commercial basis—or to come to an arrangement with HMRC. The most important message that I can give from the Dispatch Box today to those involved in these schemes is to get out of avoidance, to get in touch with HMRC and to settle their affairs. They will have a sympathetic and proportionate hearing.

**Adult Education Funding**

14. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What recent discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Education on the adequacy of funding for adult education. [908877]

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury** (Elizabeth Truss): We fully fund adults to take English and Maths to level 2. From 2020, we will also be funding them for basic digital skills. Those are the vital skills that people need to get a job and get on in life.

**Wera Hobhouse:** In the last 10 years, total enrolment of adults in further education colleges has dropped by 62%, including at Bath College in my constituency. Enrolment in health and social care is down by 68%; in engineering, it is down by 68%; and in construction, it is down by 37%. Does the Minister agree that this situation is of huge concern and that the Treasury must look at serious reinvestment in adult skills as part of the upcoming spending review?

**Elizabeth Truss:** We do fund the core courses that are going to help people get work and get on in life, but we also provide adult learner loans so that people can help shape their own future. In 2017-18, we spent £220 million on those loans.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [908889] **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer** (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of the British people. At this juncture, the best way to achieve that objective is to support a negotiated Brexit, ensuring a smooth and orderly departure from the EU.

**Alex Chalk:** Cheltenham’s Government-backed future cyber-park will deliver jobs and opportunities for local people. What role will the Government’s university enterprise zones play in ensuring that this project is backed to its full potential?

**Mr Hammond:** I welcome the work that is going on in Cheltenham to build on the magnetic effect of GCHQ and to attract innovative cyber-based firms to the area. In autumn Budget 2018, I announced £5 million to support proposals for university enterprise zones, which will encourage collaboration between universities and businesses, promote knowledge and skills exchange, and deliver a boost to local productivity. The funding will allow excellent institutions such as the University of Gloucestershire to develop locally led proposals to build on strengths like cyber-security, technology and engineering.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Let me bring the Chancellor back to Brexit. He knows full well the impact that no deal would have on people’s everyday lives. As we have heard, the British Retail Consortium warned yesterday that a no deal would lead to higher food prices, and even to empty shelves. The Government’s own economic analysis suggests a 10% hit to real wages. Knowing all this, would not a responsible Chancellor—a senior member of the Cabinet—stand up to the Prime Minister to insist that she rule out a no deal?

**Mr Hammond:** We are absolutely determined to avoid no deal, but the way to avoid no deal is to deliver a deal. As the Prime Minister has said from this Dispatch Box many times, the choice is stark: do the deal or face no deal or no Brexit. No Brexit would be a betrayal of the democratic decision of the British people, and no deal would be a betrayal of our economic future. The deal is the only way forward that protects our democracy and our economy.

**John McDonnell:** It is a deal that lost in this House by a majority of 230. Just as business leaders were not reassured by the Chancellor’s phone call, I do not think the House will be reassured by his response today. The Bank of England has warned that we are potentially facing an economic crisis even more severe than the financial crisis of 2008. Past holders of his great office of state would have had the strength and authority around the Cabinet table to prevent the Prime Minister from behaving so recklessly. At a time when the country is facing a potential national economic crisis, has there ever been a Chancellor so weak?

**Mr Hammond:** If the right hon. Gentleman believes what he has just told the House, he should get off his backside and get the Leader of the Opposition off his backside, and they should get themselves over to Downing Street to sit down and engage with the Prime Minister so that we can solve this problem in the national interest.

**T3. [908891] Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): The Chancellor will know that the great county of Essex is underfunded, on per capita measures, for education, health and policing, so will he use the forthcoming comprehensive spending review to ensure that Essex is at the top of the list so we can make sure that our services are well funded?

**Mr Speaker:** There is a lot to be said for Essex. The right hon. Lady and I can agree about that.

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury** (Elizabeth Truss): Mr Speaker is right: the only way is Essex. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) is a great champion of the fantastic county of Essex, and she will have noticed that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has already launched a fair funding consultation on local government spending. In the spending review, we will, of course, look at the different funding streams and make sure they are fair for all parts of the country.

**T2. [908890] Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): In the north, we face years of disruption on the trans-Pennine line, but there is no money for electrification. In London, the Government bail-out Crossrail to the tune of £1.4 billion,
in addition to what they have already spent. When is the Chancellor going to act to tackle these inequalities in transport infrastructure spending, which are damaging the economies of the north of England?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The hon. Lady is incorrect. Over the course of this Parliament, infrastructure spending will be highest in the north of England—higher than in London, higher than in the south-east and significantly higher than under the last Labour Government.

T7. [908895] Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Will the Chancellor give a firm commitment that debts owed to major Departments such as Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions will fall within the breathing space scheme?

Mr Philip Hammond: We have a cross-Whitehall committee that regularly discusses impacts of a no-deal exit and makes preparations for them. The issues that the hon. Lady raises have been and will continue to be considered in that forum.

T8. [908896] Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What is the Minister’s estimate of new start-ups in the creative industries and of their contribution to the economy?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): A consultation was launched in October, and we intend it to be as wide as possible. The consultation closes today and the Government will respond shortly, but we are very sympathetic to where my right hon. Friend is coming from.

Mr Philip Hammond: We have a cross-Whitehall committee that regularly discusses impacts of a no-deal on the Transport Secretary about the economic impact of a no-deal on cities that have regional ports?

Mr Speaker: Let us hear about the jazz situation in Runnymede.

Mr Hammond: Jazz is alive and well in Runnymede. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will give me the precise address of the Runnymede Jazz Club later. The measures we announced in the Budget to support high street and retail more generally apply to all retail outlets with a rateable value of less than £51,000. If he has a specific point to make about music venues, I or one of my colleagues would be happy to meet him to talk about it.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I welcome the future high streets fund and the various business rate reliefs that the Chancellor has provided. What more can he do to support bricks and mortar retailers who have a far greater business tax liability than the online giants they are now competing against?

Robert Jenrick: We have made more than £1.5 billion available to reduce the impact of business rates on smaller retailers. At the Budget, we provided a 30% discount for small retailers, which will have a huge impact in my hon. Friend’s constituency. We have the £675 million future high streets fund, and we are also bringing forward planning reforms to make it easier for small businesses and entrepreneurs to change the use of their shops and restaurants.

T9. [908897] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Last week, in an absolute hammer blow to the east end of Glasgow, Santander announced that it was closing the Parkhead branch and abandoning the east end. So when I meet Santander bosses this afternoon, can I ask the Chancellor, who has Runnymede Jazz Club in his constituency, giving a rates discount to pubs but not to music venues? Will he look at that again?

Mr Philip Hammond: I agree with my hon. Friend on this. Forecasting has had a bit of a bad rap in this House over the past couple of years, but this report was interesting, because it showed that economic forecasts in fact have a good track record of delivering, and we should pay attention to what the experts are telling us.

Mr Speaker: Let us hear from Commerce Bank that found that economic forecasting is more accurate now than it has been for most of the past 30 years?

Mr Philip Hammond: I agree with the hon. Lady. Friend on this. Forecasting has had a bit of a bad rap in this House over the past couple of years, but this report was interesting, because it showed that economic forecasts in fact have a good track record of delivering, and we should pay attention to what the experts are telling us.

T6. [908894] Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is Independent Venue Week. Such venues are the research and development to a £4.5 billion music industry, but a third of them have closed in the past decade. Why is the Chancellor, who has Runnymede Jazz Club in his constituency, giving a rates discount to pubs but not to music venues? Will he look at that again?

Mr Philip Hammond: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Forecasting has had a bit of a bad rap in this House over the past couple of years, but this report was interesting, because it showed that economic forecasts in fact have a good track record of delivering, and we should pay attention to what the experts are telling us.
really matter to them, so is that not precisely why we Conservatives voted for a tax cut for 32 million people, by contrast with the Opposition? Will we continue to be truly the party for working people?

Mel Stride: We are truly the party for working people, as my hon. Friend states, unlike the Labour party. We are the party that raised the personal allowance to £12,500 one year ahead of our manifesto commitment to do so, taking well over 4 million of the lowest paid out of tax altogether. We are also the party of the national living wage, which will go up by 4.9% this April and be of great benefit to the very lowest paid in our country.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): We knew that shifting the BBC licence fee concession to the BBC has always been folly, but we now know from the BBC’s consultation that the £745 million cost is likely to mean either a reduction in output, pensioners losing the concession, or both. Will the UK Government finally reverse this ridiculous decision and bring the concession back to the Government?

Mr Philip Hammond: A consultation is under way that I believe ends on 13 February. Once it is complete, the Government will consider it.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What is the Treasury’s view of the idea of opportunity zones to help to revitalise some of the more disadvantaged parts of our country, particularly in that they differ from enterprise zones because they involve a capital gains cut rather than other types of tax relief?

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his article proposing new ideas. He raises one example of some of the exciting prospects for the post-Brexit economy that will help to revive some of the industrial areas throughout Britain.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Does the Chancellor of the Exchequer have any plans to meet Tom Enders, the chief executive of Airbus, to discuss his view that no deal will be disastrous for the UK economy?

Mr Philip Hammond: I am pleased to say that I recently had an opportunity to talk to Tom Enders and his successor Guillaume Faury, the incoming chief executive of Airbus, and to assure them of the Government’s commitment to make the UK a hospitable and attractive place for Airbus to continue to do business.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): UK corporation tax was already the third lowest in the G20, yet this year the Government are spending more on an unnecessary corporation tax cut than it would cost to end the cruel benefits freeze. Politics is about choices. Can the Chancellor not see that when the poorest are suffering, a race to the bottom on corporation tax is the wrong priority?

Mr Hammond: If we want to have well-funded public services and a generous welfare support system in this country, we also have to ensure that we have a solid business base creating the jobs and the tax revenues for the future. It is about getting that balance right, and in my opinion right now is not the time to be sending a negative message to businesses about the attractiveness of investing in the UK.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When is the Chancellor going to make money available to address the shortage of police officers in the west midlands? We are 3,000 short. I regularly have representations from residents in Finham, Willenhall and St Michael’s about the high increase of crime in their areas. When is the Chancellor going to make funds available to replace these officers?

Elizabeth Truss: As the hon. Gentleman will recognise, the recent police grant funding statement provided extra funding, both from grant and from precept, into the police, meaning funding will be going up in real terms.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Sirius Minerals already employs more than 800 people in North Yorkshire and Teesside in the world’s largest polyhalite mine, but to bring 50 years of growth and job opportunities to our region, it needs a Treasury guarantee on its funding. Will the Chancellor make that guarantee available today and unleash a whole new era of jobs and opportunities in my area?

Mr Philip Hammond: I am familiar with the project in question and a discussion is going on between the company and the Treasury. Those discussions are of course commercially sensitive and confidential, so I cannot discuss them, but the conversation is ongoing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I feel sure that the House will want to hear the Strangford Zebedee. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has been bouncing up and down on virtually every question; I do not want him to feel socially excluded.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): They always wish to hear the Strangford perspective on life, but that is by the bye. Will the Chancellor outline the possible negative effects that reducing the deficit could and would have on the defence budget in the next three years?

Mr Hammond: The Government have made a commitment to maintain the real-terms value of the defence budget at 2% of our GDP, increasing defence spending in real terms in every year. We have no intention of changing that commitment to UK defence.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): When will the Chancellor give some much-needed money to our police forces?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have just pointed out, we have given extra grant funding to the police forces. We are also achieving better efficiencies in conjunction with the Home Office, and we have covered the cost of additional pensions as well.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Workers at Dyson, Jaguar Land Rover and Ford are among the casualties of the threat of no deal. Given the number of
Mr Philip Hammond: Parliament speaks for itself, and Parliament clearly has the opportunity to speak on this issue. I will continue to work with the Prime Minister to try to ensure that the deal that we place before the House of Commons is improved in a way that allows Members of Parliament to get behind it to ensure that we are not faced with the unacceptable choice of either no deal or no Brexit.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Further to the question asked by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), will my right hon. Friend find time to have a meeting with my constituent, Sir James Dyson, to ask for confirmation that, rather than taking people to Singapore, he is taking only two senior executives to Singapore? He has invested £200 million in a research and development facility at Hullavington in my constituency and £43 million in a college in Malmesbury. He is employing 4,500 people, and that number is increasing rather than decreasing.

Mr Hammond: I or one of my colleagues will be very happy to meet Sir James Dyson should he request such a meeting. We regularly meet industrial leaders, and we will continue to do so.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Yesterday, the Prime Minister announced her support for the Brady amendment, which will profoundly change the deal. What right has the Chancellor got to ask us to vote for a deal that the Prime Minister herself wants to tear up?

Mr Hammond: In a very short while, after a very important statement that is about to be made by my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the Prime Minister will set out her case to the House, and the hon. Gentleman and all his colleagues will be able to consider carefully what is now in the national interest.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Can the Chancellor explain to people across the UK what the point is in balancing the books if it is done on the backs of the poorest in our society and they are being starved into shoplifting? In Dundee recently, a woman was left with £90 a month on which to live. The sheriff said that it was a matter of considerable concern that someone was trying to live on £90 a month. What does he say to the judiciary and what does he say to our citizens who are being starved into poverty?

Mr Hammond: Earlier in this session, I said that, if we want to have well-funded public services and a well-funded welfare support system, we must ensure that we have a sound economy. Part of having a sound economy is to get our deficit under control and our debt falling so that we are less vulnerable to shocks in the future. Our current levels of debt mean that this country is vulnerable in the event of an economic downturn. Such downturns come along from time to time, and we need to be able to manage them in order, precisely, to protect the poorest in our society.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the Government’s idea of turning high streets into residential streets or office spaces is not a solution to solving our high street crisis?

Mr Hammond: That is not what the Government propose or have proposed, but we must recognise that retail is changing and that the nature of our high streets has to change. The future high street will probably be smaller than the high streets of today. It makes sense to use the land that is released around our high streets to develop residential accommodation, addressing the housing challenges that we face, but also bringing footfall back into our high streets and town centre areas to give them vibrancy and a decent chance for the future.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What procurement and budget advice did the Chancellor’s Department provide the Department for Transport before it awarded a ferry contract to a ferry company with no ferries?

Mr Hammond: The Department for Transport has complied with all the Treasury’s Green Book procedures in letting the contract in question, and the decision to go ahead will have been taken with the consent of the Department for Transport’s accounting officer.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I may have erroneously misled the House when I said that the Minister said that the Government were creating 75 businesses a minute. It has been pointed out to me that he actually said 75 businesses a second.

Mr Speaker: No, I think that the Minister said a business every 75 seconds.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): But is it true?

Mr Speaker: It is not for the Speaker to be the arbiter of truth. Knowing the ambitions of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), it is important that he knows what he is letting himself in for. He would have important responsibilities, but the adjudication upon the matter of truth would not be one of them.

Mr Sheerman: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: In deference to the seniority of the hon. Gentleman, I will hear his point of order if he insists.

Mr Sheerman: I just wanted to thank you for correcting the record, Mr Speaker. I would be glad if the record could be put straight. As you said, the figure was 75 businesses a second. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: I am getting advice that is the product of the scholarly cranium of the Clerk of the House, but I think I will leave the hon. Gentleman to find his own salvation. We will leave it there.
HMRC Estate Transformation

12.46 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement relating to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs estate transformation.

In the 2015 spending review, the Government announced HMRC’s locations programme to transport the Department’s office accommodation across the United Kingdom, moving from 170 legacy offices to 13 regional centres over the space of 10 years. I am pleased to report to the House that HMRC has now successfully secured sites for each of these 13 regional centres. This is a significant milestone in the Department’s trajectory towards serving the taxpayer from buildings that facilitate more efficient and technologically adept working across every region and country of the United Kingdom.

This year will see two regional centres open in Belfast and Bristol—the first to follow the pilot in Croydon and to learn from the Department’s findings there. I will be receiving the keys from the developer on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government in the handover next month in Bristol.

HMRC offices in 2015 varied hugely in size, quality and accessibility of location, but HMRC has since worked towards offices that are well equipped and large enough to offer serious career progression in city centre locations that allow for travel across the country as well as the recruitment of local graduates. The higher standard of building, designed to support digital, flexible ways of working, is an integral component of HMRC’s broader plans to better provide service to the taxpayer at a lower cost. It is by making better use of technology and working differently that HMRC can become a more highly skilled organisation, maximising revenue, increasing compliance and further reducing the tax gap.

Its Croydon regional centre is already open, impressing those who visit it with a new understanding of what it means to work for the civil service and providing a valuable prototype for the remaining offices.

Securing the locations of these 13 offices is an important step in the wider Government plans to create hubs across the country, and to move civil servants out of London and the south-east. The regional centres are not just offices for HMRC, but form part of Government hubs and sites for cross-Government work. NHS Digital will be taking space in the Leeds regional centre, for example, and the Department for Work and Pensions will be taking space in Birmingham.

The Cabinet Office is responsible for the wider Government hubs programme and it plans to align Government policy so that it is efficiently used and maximises opportunities for, and productivity of, civil servants. HMRC’s 13 regional centres are the first phase of delivering this vision. I am proud that the public sector is stepping up to the forefront of industry, thinking about what an effective, flexible and inclusive working environment looks and feels like. Far from lagging behind the private sector, HMRC is delivering offices that are suited to the 21st century, maximising current technology and planning ahead for what further change might be in the pipeline. Not only will this enable HMRC to provide its customers with good service while cracking down on the dishonest minority, it is also excellent value for money, saving over £300 million in the 10 years of the programme up until 2025 and then saving a further £90 million a year from 2028.

The route to this transformation is balanced by the recognition that, to protect HMRC from business disruption, current staff and their expertise should be retained wherever possible. HMRC believes that about 90% of the staff that it had at the start of this transformational journey will move to a new regional centre or finish their careers in their current offices. To further manage potential disruption, the Department is keeping eight transitional sites that will be open for longer to help to maintain continuity.

As HMRC gears up to manage the workload resulting from exiting the European Union, it is also providing additional space in regional centre cities for additional staff and retaining some space for longer so that the planning can benefit from the knowledge and experience of existing personnel.

To transform the services that HMRC delivers for the United Kingdom, we are modernising almost every aspect of what we do. I am proud that HMRC is at the forefront of this change within the civil service, and I commend this statement to the House.

12.51 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I was given advance notice of the contents of this statement while I was in the Chamber for Treasury questions, and therefore time has been limited to prepare for it. I am surprised that we are now discussing this matter given that I (and many of my colleagues) have repeatedly raised problems with the Building our Future programme and generally been met with one-sentence answers from the Government.

The Minister maintains that this announcement has come today because of the successful securing of sites for 13 regional centres, so I hope that he will indicate to this House which centre was secured yesterday to justify this statement being presented today. When will he publish the list of precise locations of each of these centres, given that he maintains that we have today secured those new places? That would be enormously helpful for us, because without that information we will be forced to conclude that this statement has been made today for reasons other than its newsworthiness.

In July 2014, HMRC published the Building our Future proposals on reforming tax collection services for the next five years. In November 2015, HMRC announced plans to cut the number of offices from 170 to the 13 that are, apparently, having their locations announced today. In January 2017, the National Audit Office published its report on that process. It indicated that that original plan was unrealistic. It stated that the estimate of estate costs over the next 10 years had risen by nearly £600 million—almost a fifth—with more than half of that being due to higher than anticipated running costs for the new buildings. The National Audit Office also forecast a further 5,900 job losses and said that the costs of redundancy and travel had tripled from £17 million to £54 million due to this programme.

So what exactly is happening now among the HMRC workforce as a result of Building our Future? Some 73% of HMRC staff surveyed said that the Building our Future plans will undermine their ability to provide tax collection services. Half of them said that it would actually undermine their ability to clamp down on tax evasion and avoidance. I have to say that that was my
assessment as well when I visited a number of current and former HMRC offices right across the country—10 of them—over the past few months.

The Government say in this statement that “90% of the staff that HMRC “had at the start of this transformational journey”—a piece of jargon if ever I heard one—“will move to a new regional centre or finish their careers in their current offices.”

During the visits that I conducted, I did hear about staff finishing their careers—they were finishing their careers early because they could not travel to the new regional centres that the Minister is trumpeting today. People from Wrexham were being expected to travel every single day to Cardiff or to Liverpool. People from Exeter were being expected to travel to Bristol. These journeys are simply not feasible for people with caring responsibilities and simply not feasible on public transport.

I note that the Minister said that having city centre locations leads to a situation where it will be possible to recruit local graduates, but of course what his Department has forgotten, and what the NAO reminded him of a couple of years ago, is that in many of these city centre locations the labour market is far tighter, so we often find that there is actually an enormous recruitment problem rather than the bonanza that might be suggested to people who read his statement uncritically.

At the end of the statement, the Government accept, it seems, the need to learn from expertise. I will quote the sentence, although it pains me a little to do so given its construction:

“As HMRC gears up to manage the workload resulting from exiting the European Union, it is also providing additional space in regional centre cities”,

which I assume means offices,

“for additional staff and retaining some space for longer so that the planning”—

of what, we do not know—

“can benefit from the knowledge and experience of existing personnel.”

Well, that raises almost as many questions as it answers. The situation is still unclear about where 5,000 extra customs staff will go—a point I will return to later.

None the less, that sentence, as garbled as it is, suggests that HMRC wants to build on existing experience, but that principle is just not being followed in the Building our Future programme. We had within HMRC centres of excellence across a whole range of different specialisms, whether income tax fraud or the different kinds of multifarious problems that taxpayers can have in filling out their self-assessment forms. Many of the staff who were employed in those specialisms have either already left or are thinking of leaving. A great example of this is what we have seen happening in Swindon, which was previously a centre for income tax fraud. There is now a centre of excellence being built up on that in Liverpool, but with none of the same staff and with none of that expertise. It is being built up from scratch, creating huge inefficiency.

The Government have dogmatically refused to reassess the Building our Future programme apart from when they have been forced to do so—as they acknowledge very, very briefly in this statement—and that is exacerbating problems in HMRC. The attrition rate is greater than the hire rate. We saw in 2014 an absolute reduction in staff of over 3,000 and in 2015 an absolute reduction in staff of over 4,000. In 2017, the UK had the second highest attrition rate out of the 55 countries that share data on their tax services. There has also been incredible mismanagement, with the release of 5,600 customer services staff and then, in 2015, the hiring of 2,400 new customer services staff. It is no surprise that morale is at rock bottom in HMRC.

I therefore want to ask some very quick questions of the Minister. Which new regional centre was secured yesterday? When will we have the list of locations of regional centres? If 90% of positions are retained or vacated due to people finishing their careers, does that mean that 10% of people in HMRC are going to be made redundant? Have there been any reviews of these plans in the context of Brexit? Has the Minister thought about the impact of this on the local economies that are so dependent on these jobs, as raised by many of my colleagues?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her response. I will pick up on some of the points that she has raised.

The hon. Lady asked why this statement is being delivered today. I think that she partly, at least, supplied the reason for that herself, in that she has shown a very keen interest in these matters, as have many other Members across the House, quite rightly. It is right, as we have always said, that we will be transparent in the roll-out of this transformation programme, and today is part of that process.

Towards the end of the hon. Lady’s remarks, she called for a review of our arrangements in the context of Brexit and the customs arrangements that our country may face. That is the second reason why it is important that we consider these matters. The debate this afternoon will rightly focus on preparedness, among other matters, and HMRC and its transformation programme lies at the heart of the issues that will be debated.

The hon. Lady asked for the locations of these sites. I believe they are all in the public domain, but I am happy to provide her with a list. She also made several observations about the NAO report and value for money. We are still confident that we will meet our roll-out end date of around 2025. In terms of value for money, there will be savings of some £300 million across the 10 years. I remind the hon. Lady that we will be getting out of a substantial number of private finance initiative contracts that the existing offices are engaged with—PFI contracts that were brought in under her party’s Government in 2001. One driver of additional value for money is that we will be able to unpick the unfavourable arrangements that her party’s Government got us into in the first place.

The hon. Lady asked about the cost of redundancy. I said in my opening remarks that some 90% of those who will be impacted by these moves will either conclude their career in their existing offices or relocate to the new regional hub. The overall thrust of these changes is to ensure that we are better equipped at getting in more tax. It is very much a Labour philosophy that every solution has to involve more money and more people, whereas our approach is adjusting with the times and getting offices in place that are fit for the 21st century,
often using complicated data-based interrogation techniques, for which large regional hubs are the way forward.

Some of the 170 legacy offices that the hon. Lady seems so intent upon protecting had under 10 staff in them. Most of the processes carried out by those staff were manual in nature rather than technology-driven, so they were far less efficient. For example, over 80% of self-assessment returns are now done in a digital format, which is why it is important that we move to this model.

I turn to the hon. Lady’s remarks about the staff themselves, who have been at the heart of our considerations as we have rolled out this process. All staff are given at least one year’s notice of any proposed change. They are quite rightly given face-to-face meetings with their managers to discuss the changes and assistance that they may require. In determining the locations of the regional hubs, HMRC mapped out the journey to work of the staff who would be impacted, to ensure that that was one of the principles taken into account when assessing where the locations should be. Those who have extended travel arrangements as a consequence of any move may be given assistance with additional travel costs for between three and five years. Transitional offices, which the hon. Lady raised, will provide additional opportunities for continuity of HMRC’s work and the opportunity of employment for those within these arrangements.

There is a purpose to this. It is not just about saving money, closing offices, suggesting that we are ready for the 21st century or making change for the sake of change. The purpose of these changes is to ensure that we continue the excellent work that HMRC is carrying out in clamping down on avoidance, evasion and non-compliance. The proof of the cake is in the eating: some £200 billion has been brought in or protected since 2010, and we have one of the lowest tax gaps in the world at 5.7%. That does not happen by magic; it happens by having an HMRC that is lean, efficient and up to the job. I commend this statement to the House.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): More than 1,000 people work for HMRC in Southend. I understand that Southend will not be a regional centre, but what does this mean for the people who work in HMRC in Southend? Do the words “eight transitional sites” offer them any short-term hope? Will the Financial Secretary work with me to ensure that the figure is 90%-plus in Southend?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As he will be aware, we have announced that we will retain the Southend office until the end of 2022, but I am happy to meet him to discuss that matter.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Financial Secretary for giving this statement and for advance sight of it. It is clear that he has drawn the short straw today—perhaps it is penance for his “no food, no channel tunnel” gaffe. Somebody needed to give a statement so that we had less time for the Brexit debate, and at least 10 fewer Members will get to speak in it as a result of this statement.

This is an important statement, but the timing is bizarre, given that on 8 January HMRC produced on its website a list of addresses and details of the transitional sites. How come it has taken 21 days for the Financial Secretary to come to Parliament to allow us to ask questions on this statement? How come it happens to be on the day when we are discussing Brexit?

As the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) said, the entire programme of transformation and the way that this has been gone about is completely opaque. Dedicated, experienced staff are being forced out of HMRC as a result of these closures. Communities such as Cumbernauld and Livingston are losing thousands of jobs as a result of these changes. Why on earth does the Financial Secretary think it is good value to close a large out-of-town office and move it to a city centre location where rents are hugely in excess of those in out-of-town locations, where staff will have massively increased travel costs to get to work and where business rates are likely to be far higher? Why does he think that this is a good idea?

The Financial Secretary said that 90% of staff who were at HMRC at the beginning of this process will still be there at the end. What about the 10% of staff who will not be there at the end? Will those staff be made redundant? How many of those 10% of staff are in Scotland?

People worked in HMRC offices in Inverness, Wick and Aberdeen, but the only regional offices in Scotland will be in Edinburgh and Glasgow. Does the Financial Secretary realise how long it takes to get from Aberdeen to Edinburgh, from Inverness to Glasgow or from Wick to Glasgow? It takes the best part of a day to get there from Wick. There is no way that people can commute that distance.

In terms of the customs checking functions that HMRC will need to perform, does the Financial Secretary believe that there will be adequate geographical coverage of customs staff once Brexit happens? More checks by customs officers will be required at those ports, and if it takes them a day to get to the port, there will be even more of a hold-up than is being suggested in a no-deal scenario.

I understand that HMRC is taking on an extra 5,300 staff to deal with Brexit planning. Could the Financial Secretary confirm how many of those 5,300 staff who are being taken on or have been taken on are in Scotland? How many of the 3,000 additional customer service staff who have been taken on are in Scotland? How many jobs will HMRC have in Scotland at the end of this process compared with the beginning? Lastly, I want to know why the Financial Secretary has taken 21 days to come to the House to tell us what was published on HMRC’s website on 8 January.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raised a number of questions, one of which was about the issue of staff.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Answer the question.

Mel Stride: If the hon. Gentleman gives me a moment, I will do precisely that, as I always do.

The answers to the hon. Lady’s questions relating to staff and the way in which we will be handling the staff are as I have set out. All staff will have at least one year’s notice of any impending move. The mapping process that HMRC undertook, as it went into the
detail of where to locate the regional hubs, was very thorough. It took into account a number of principles, which I will come on to in a moment to answer another of the hon. Lady’s questions. Among those principles is the issue of the travel-to-work time, and every single employee’s home location was mapped against the possible new alternatives under consideration at the time those decisions were being made. I have also raised the issue of the transition offices, which are of course there, among other reasons, to provide employment opportunities for the staff.

The location principles—this comes to the questions the hon. Lady asked about why we have chosen one particular location rather than another, or indeed the existing location of the legacy offices—come down to eight key principles. They include transport connections, which are of course excellent in both Edinburgh and Glasgow, and the talent pool there, such as in universities—for example, Edinburgh and Glasgow have world-class universities—as well as the housing that is available, the quality of the schools and all the matters that will sustain the recruitment of the teams we will be bringing together in these 21st-century and much more sophisticated hubs for dealing with our tax purposes.

The hon. Lady raised the issue, which I know she has raised on previous occasions, of the location of these hubs in relation to our ports and points of entry into the United Kingdom. I think I can reassure her that, quite outside this whole process of the transitional arrangements, we will of course ensure that Border Force, HMRC and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have the personnel available at those locations to make sure that they are able to run imports and exports efficiently. There is a general premise, however, in the suggestion that the offices somehow need to be close to people all the time. In fact, since 2014, it has been the case—[Interruption.]—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think there is a sense in the Chamber that there is an inadvertent abuse going on. This is not a debate; it is a statement. The Financial Secretary has twice said that he commended the statement to the House: he said it in response to the first set of questions, and he had already said it when he delivered the statement. A brief and pithy encapsulation of the argument is what is required. A long dilation is not only not required, but notably irritating to the House.

Mel Stride: As a former tax inspector, my hon. Friend is probably about as popular as I am as a tax Minister, which is never the most popular job in the world. The answer to his question—in a short and pithy response, Mr Speaker—is that we have to move to the more digital-based, data-based and inspection-based system that is facilitated by the very hubs I have been describing.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): This has already cost more; the projected savings have gone down; there are no break clauses in most of the 20 to 25-year leases; and there is little buy-in from other Departments. The Minister has said that the DWP and NHS Digital—interestingly, he picked only two small examples—are buying into a couple of the hubs. Will he list the other Departments that are buying in by locating in these regional hubs?

Mel Stride: There has been a series of discussions right across Whitehall, led by the Cabinet Office, in the area in which the hon. Lady has framed her question. The hon. Lady levelled the charge of cost, but she then very quickly went on to talk about savings, and there will of course be net savings from this approach of some £300 million by 2025.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Representing a coastal community, as I do, regional centres tend to be very many miles away. This is clearly a problem for staff, but also for constituents in their dealings with HMRC. Will the Minister give an assurance that, even in this digital age, face-to-face meetings between staff and constituents, where necessary, will be available locally?

Mel Stride: All requests for face-to-face meetings are of course treated on their merits, and they are certainly not discarded out of hand. I reiterate my point that, since 2014, tax offices have generally not been open for members of the public to walk in and ask to speak to a tax inspector. Indeed, some 80% of self-assessments are now done digitally online.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I have a tax office in Wolverhampton South West that is going to close, and my constituents are not happy. For a start, Carillion has gone and now the tax office is going, and it does not make sense. The Minister has talked about face-to-face meetings, but there are actually a lot of face-to-face meetings in that tax office. The staff there are not happy about having to travel, and the Government are going to lose a lot of staff with experience. How can he explain that with regard to the regional hubs, because they are supposed to go to Birmingham?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises the issue of the tax office in her particular area of Wolverhampton. I am very happy at any point—this is of course an invitation to any Member—to speak to her specifically about the circumstances of the HMRC office in her location. Equally, Birmingham is not a huge distance from Wolverhampton for many of those people to commute to, but if the hon. Lady would like to take up any aspects of that with me, I will be delighted to speak to her.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I welcome HMRC’s work on the transformation of its estate and on gearing up for customs readiness for any eventuality. In particular, it is great news that the CHIEF—customs handling of import and export freight—system will be fully ready
on 30 March to handle declarations for customs and that simplifications of customs procedure are being made available to business. That will enable imports of goods into the UK to flow without hold-ups using inland clearance techniques. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that we will indeed be ready and that fear is unjustified? Will he say what he is doing to ensure that a campaign is now activated to inform small and medium-sized enterprises about what they have to do to make use of the simplifications?

**Mel Stride:** On the IT systems element of my hon. Friend’s question, he is absolutely right. CHIEF has been upgraded, and it is now capable of processing about 90 messages per second, which will be enough to handle the import and export declarations that may be required.

On the issue of informing the marketplace or traders about the new circumstances that may pertain after 29 March, we have written to 145,000 exporters that export only to the European Union and are not therefore familiar with customs arrangements. We have issued three iterations of our partnership pack and there is a huge amount of information on gov.uk, where businesses can also sign up to email alerts to make sure that they are aware of the very latest relevant information.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): On behalf of myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith), I have written to the Minister to ask for a meeting, with one or two reps from the trade unions, to discuss the situation in Wolverhampton and Coventry. People in Coventry will have to travel 16 miles to premises that are inadequate, while those who are left are not guaranteed jobs. I will not rehearse all the arguments now, but I would like to meet the Minister, with some reps and my hon. Friend, to discuss this further. Will he agree to do so?

**Mel Stride:** I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matters he has raised.

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Improving public services is about more than just spending more money; it is about delivering better services more efficiently, on which the Treasury is well placed to lead. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that these changes will improve the services available to my constituents and how much money will he save to spend on the other public services they receive?

**Mel Stride:** I can confirm that services will be improved. All the evidence suggests that is the case as we have upgraded and brought HMRC into the 21st century, and I have already stated that the savings will be of the order of £300 million in the run-up to 2025.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) pointed out, the nearest centre will be a huge distance from my constituency. If we end up out of the customs union, ports such as Scrabster and Wick in my constituency will be the UK’s border. How exactly will the Minister get HMRC to support those ports? If he is going to put personnel in them, why do we not simply reopen the Wick tax office?

**Mel Stride:** I cannot comment on the specific tax office that the hon. Gentleman mentions, although I am of course very happy to discuss that element of his question outside this statement. As I have already set out, having effective manpower at our ports and borders is a matter of making sure that we have adequate HMRC, Border Force and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs staff available for that, and it will not impact on the fact that we are rearranging our HMRC tax offices.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Property prices tend to fluctuate, so how long are the leases on the new centres, and what break clauses are included in them?

**Mel Stride:** I will write to my hon. Friend with the answer to that question, on the basis that these are all individual arrangements that have been entered into. As for lease arrangements, the first stage of the process is to enter into a commitment with the developer to take possession of the building; the lease is signed in due course. I will, of course, write to him with a more specific answer.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Given that a no-deal Brexit is likely to increase massively the number of customs declarations made at ports such as Hull by those transporting goods through them, and given that that is combined with the Department for Transport’s general lack of preparedness when it comes to our ports, how can the Minister justify taking these decisions at this point?

**Mel Stride:** These are two relatively unrelated matters. Reconfiguring our tax offices is important for the reasons I set out in the statement. As to the hon. Lady’s point about preparedness for the very large increase that there may be in customs declarations, depending on where we land with the deal, I pointed out in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) that CHIEF has been upgraded substantially; it will be able to handle the kind of volumes that it may be necessary to handle.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister may have heard of Trump Plaza in Atlantic City, which is now closed, but is he aware of Telford Plaza in the borough of Telford and Wrekin, which is very much open, and is the largest letting in Telford and Wrekin in the last decade? It is 112,000 square feet over 13 floors, and many HMRC staff are employed there. Would he care to visit that centre of excellence, when he can find the time in his diary?

**Mel Stride:** I thank my hon. Friend for shamelessly promoting, quite rightly, the properties in his constituency. I would be very happy to meet him to discuss the area.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Mr Speaker, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

The Minister keeps referring to bringing together hubs, but the danger is that that will mean everything moving to big cities, and all the smaller towns in a constituency, such as all those towns in the valleys in
south Wales, losing out. There are loyal HMRC workers, and cheaper properties, in many of these towns. Will he not look at those smaller towns?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is suggesting that we set all current arrangements in aspic. Going back some decades, there would have been not 170 offices across the country, but several hundred. No doubt if we went back in time, the hon. Gentleman would have been on his feet telling us that we should keep 700 offices, rather than shrinking the number down to 170. The reality is that the way that the tax authority conducts its affairs is effective—I have given the figures—and there is a model that makes that happen. That lends itself to 21st-century hubs that have the right resourcing to do the job.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Given that cheaper premises were available just up the road in Bradford, it is absolutely ridiculous that the Yorkshire hub will be in Leeds. As HMRC made no economic impact assessment of the effect on the places that it is moving out of, will the Minister look at what financial support the Treasury can give from its savings to Shipley, to make sure that its local economy is not damaged by the closure of its tax office? There is already great congestion for commuters trying to get to Leeds on the train; what investment will he make to ensure that people can get from my constituency to Leeds on the train, which they cannot do at the moment?

Mel Stride: The decision to have a Leeds office as opposed to a Bradford office has been rigorously looked at. It hinged on eight principles, some of which I set out in my response to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who spoke for the Scottish National party. On my hon. Friend’s more general point about the economic impact, the House should celebrate the economic success that we have had; we have the highest level of employment and lowest unemployment since the mid-1970s, and it is this Government’s policies that are providing that.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Four hundred people work for HMRC in George Stephenson House in Stockton South. Many of them have built their lives as carers and parents around their work. Will he not look at those smaller towns?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is suggesting that we set all current arrangements in aspic. Going back some decades, there would have been not 170 offices across the country, but several hundred. No doubt if we went back in time, the hon. Gentleman would have been on his feet telling us that we should keep 700 offices, rather than shrinking the number down to 170. The reality is that the way that the tax authority conducts its affairs is effective—I have given the figures—and there is a model that makes that happen. That lends itself to 21st-century hubs that have the right resourcing to do the job.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): The Minister spoke of graduates being part of this transformation scheme. Will he confirm that HMRC will offer opportunities to apprentices, and will support apprenticeships across the board?

Mel Stride: I can certainly assure my hon. Friend that HMRC engages with apprenticeship programmes and is supportive of apprentices, as are the rest of the Government.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): East Kilbride’s Centre 1 is so named because it was deemed No. 1 for taxation skills and experience, but the Public and Commercial Services Union reports that these plans lose the UK 17,000 years of tax experience. Everyone in EK knows someone who has worked in Centre 1 and utterly condemns this Government’s plans. Given that the Minister’s Department has been working constructively with me on the all-party parliamentary group on new towns to regenerate them, why is he devastating East Kilbride and new towns by closing our largest employer?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to be as passionate as she is about protecting the existing workforce and making sure that we do not lose the workforce’s vital skills. That is why we have taken this approach. We are ensuring that the new locations are viable for those from the old. For example, we are assisting those who need to travel by meeting some of their travel costs over three to five years. We very much want to keep the high level of skills in the organisation.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Businesses in Chesterfield that I have spoken to that have had cause to query HMRC judgments have found the organisation monolithic and unresponsive to their queries. Does the Minister have any assessment of how many successful businesses go bankrupt or have a huge financial deficit as a result of a lack of experience in HMRC, and what will he do about that?

Mel Stride: If we look at all the metrics, we can see that HMRC is doing extremely well on customer service at the moment, including time taken to answer telephone calls. There is always more to do, and we will continue to work at this, but it has a good record to date.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): HMRC’s New Waverley development in Edinburgh is being used for photo opportunities by Back-Bench Tory MPs even before it opens. We know that the office of the Secretary of State for Scotland and of the Advocate General for Scotland, the Office for Statistics Regulation, the Information Commissioner’s Office, the Government Actuary’s Department and Her Majesty’s Treasury are also moving in. Will the Minister tell us exactly how much this enormous white elephant is costing us, and to which other Departments HMRC will sub-let?
Mel Stride: The main thrust of the hon. Lady’s question seems to be to decry the fact that we are decanting more and more services into one location. There are many logical economic and business reasons why one would do exactly that. As for her charge that Conservative Back Benchers are going up to that location, I would suggest that that says they are very interested in these particular matters.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Unlike the CEO of HMRC, will the Minister show some common sense and heed the PCS union, which says he should halt his programme and instead concentrate on keeping the expertise, amounting to thousands of years, of staff at offices under threat?

Mel Stride: Rather like the question from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the suggestion is that we just do nothing and stay exactly as we are. That would not be to the benefit of the taxpayer. Frankly, that would not be to the benefit of the staff, either, who will have increased opportunities as a result of the changes we are bringing in.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Phoenix House in Oldham is due to close to relocate to Manchester city centre. The cruelty is that, when we asked whether a different site in Oldham could be considered, there was a categorical refusal to even shortlist a site, despite rents in Oldham being half the price of those in Manchester city centre. Does the Minister understand the anger felt in many of our towns, which are being cast aside in favour of our city centres by a Government who just do not care?

Mel Stride: HMRC has stuck to very clear, very fair and balanced guidelines on how to make the assessments—the eight location principles we have been discussing this afternoon—and I have absolutely no doubt that it was rigorous in adhering to that process. The individuals impacted by this decision are central to the approach HMRC is taking, in the way I have described.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the Minister publish an economic impact assessment for each HMRC office closure—in many towns, the largest employer is leaving? Will he publish an equality impact assessment, so we can see the impact on staff, particularly those with disabilities, who are being asked to travel over 100 miles to their new workplace?

Mel Stride: There has already been an equality impact assessment. It is in the public domain, but I would be very happy to share it with the hon. Member.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Seventy-nine per cent. of staff surveyed said that the plans undermine their ability to provide tax collection. Are HMRC staff wrong?

Mel Stride: What is wrong is the suggestion that we are not good at collecting tax. We are world class at collecting tax. We have a tax gap of just 5.7%. If we had the same tax gap that we had under the Labour party, the missing revenue would be enough to employ every policeman and woman in England and Wales. The Conservative way works; the Labour way squanders resources.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Given the staff and estate upheaval at HMRC, and the fact that the Government will not take no deal Brexit off the table, can the Minister explain to my concerned constituents why HMRC is sticking with the date of 1 April 2019 for making tax digital for all businesses—a day on which many businesses may have something else to consider?

Mel Stride: When I first became Financial Secretary, one of the early decisions I took was to limit the roll-out of Making Tax Digital to just VAT and those businesses over the VAT threshold. The roll-out was delayed. I am confident that we are now in a position where businesses will be ready for that important change. That will be of benefit to HMRC by way of tax collection and important for the efficient running of those companies.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The Minister is closing down the valuation office in Rhyll, with the loss of 40 jobs. His Government have already closed the Army careers office in Rhyll, the Crown post office and the county court. By contrast, the Welsh Labour Government are investing £50 million in new schools, £50 million in flood defences, £28 million in housing and possibly £42 million in the refurbishment of a new hospital. Why are the Conservative Government disinvesting in struggling seaside towns and reinvesting in already overheated city centres?

Mel Stride: The simple fact is that the Government are adopting an efficient approach to the use of our resources, including across HMRC. We do that for a distinct purpose: it allows us to spend more money on the things that our country expects us to spend money on, such as vital public services, including the national health service, where we will be spending £84 billion more over the next few years than under the previous Labour Government. I make no apologies for doing things that drive efficiency and allow us to support health and public services.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On value for money, the Minister is either sadly mistaken or badly briefed, because the reality for the 1,000 staff in my constituency is that they are going to one of the most expensive retail units in all of Scotland when they move to Edinburgh. Does he think it acceptable that, as I understand it from the PCS union, staff will be expected to sit in armchairs about which occupational therapists have huge concerns and that staff who have disabilities or who are in wheelchairs have been told that if they cannot reach the screen or the plug sockets on their desks someone else can do it for them?

Mel Stride: Clearly, I am not in a position to comment on very specific remarks about armchairs, but if the hon. Lady would like to raise the matter with me outside of this statement, I would be very happy to discuss it with her.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): There is deep and clear concern from the 479 hard-working HMRC staff at Sidlaw House in Dundee that their jobs may come to
an end this year, rather than as planned in 2021, which was promised by the Treasury. Can the Financial Secretary give me an absolute guarantee today that their jobs are safe until the end of 2021?

Mel Stride: I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the details of that specific office location.

BILL PRESENTED

EUROPEAN UNION (REVOCATION OF NOTICE OF WITHDRAWAL) (NO.2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Angus Brendan MacNeil, supported by Pete Wishart, presented a Bill to require the Prime Minister to revoke the notification, under Article 50(2) of the Treaty on European Union, of the United Kingdom’s intention to withdraw from the European Union, subject to the legislative consent of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales; and for connected purposes.

Bill read for the First time; to be read a Second time on 8 February, and to be printed (Bill 326).

Smoking Prohibition (National Health ServicePremises)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.37 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit smoking on National Health Service premises; and for connected purposes.

It is fabulous to have a full House, Mr Speaker. How marvellous.

This is a Bill that I hope is simple in its terms, can forge the support of as much of this House as possible and can bring us in line with the intentions of the Welsh and Scottish Parliaments—a Bill that would give our NHS trusts the legal back-up to ban smoking on their grounds, which I believe would be to the benefit of patients, visitors, staff, trusts and society more widely. During my contribution, I will try to convince Members of its benefits, but I am not naive. I am aware that some Members, indeed some commentators too, will have already written this off as some sort of attempted nanny state intervention that will only seek to cruelly deny unwell people the so-called pleasure of smoking a cigarette. I know I have my work cut out for me, so let us start at the beginning.

Our country has taken great steps in raising public awareness about the risks and harm of smoking. Those warnings are rightfully embedded in our education system. I doubt there are many children who would not know that smoking is linked to cancer and other life-threatening conditions. Most recently, Britain introduced plain packaging for cigarettes. Advertising by cigarette companies is also banned. This House has a history of introducing legislation to reduce the proliferation of smokers, including limits on where people can smoke. Work locations and public buildings both have bans in place. If there is a roof, you cannot spark up. You cannot smoke in cars with children. Yet, think about your last visit to a hospital, whether as a patient or a visitor. Why is it that, to reach the hospital, a place that by its very purpose should be a leading light of health and well-being, the chances are that you are forced to walk through great plumes of smoke to reach your location, with cigarette butts and litter filling wall-mounted bins? That scene is more than likely replicated day in, day out.

The inspiration for my Bill came from the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, which serves my constituents in Batley and Spen and people across mid-Yorkshire. On a recent service visit, I was deeply concerned to hear of the havoc that smoking on the premises can cause. As I go through some of the arguments for legally outlawing smoking on NHS grounds, keep in mind that smoking is already banned on those premises and that smokers are already defying the rules of the hospital. This Bill is about putting that in legislation.

The Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust has told me—and I have experienced this—about the unpleasant stench of smoke when people enter and exit the building. Staff face abuse when asking smokers to put out their cigarettes. The ethics of hospitals as health promoters is undermined. I also suggest that it makes the enforcement
of other rules, such as bringing alcohol on to the premises, much more difficult. Smokers congregating outside the entrance cause congestion and block access for less mobile or disabled visitors, and that is significantly worse in bad weather.

If smoking is a free-for-all as soon as visitors hit the fresh air, that affects services, too. Our hard-working and over-stretched staff are asked to escort patients outside and wait with them while they smoke, and staff are taken away from duties to let patients back into the ward after smoking. Wheelchairs are difficult to find as smokers use them, and volunteers, who have given up their time, are subject to complaints from members of the public as they walk through smokers to reach the entrance. One of the trust’s neonatal wards cannot even open the windows because smoke would come in. Just think of the risk to newborn babies and patients with breathing difficulties.

In short, the case is compelling from that one trust, but we will not achieve smoke-free hospital grounds without legislation. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is a distinguished actress and has a voice that projects, but it seems to me that the House is rather irreverent. What she is saying on this matter should be heard.

Tracy Brabin: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

A senior member of NHS staff, who will remain unnamed, said to me that we do not let alcoholics drink White Lightning, so why do we let smokers damage their recovery? Of course, the trust has not been idle waiting for legislation. It has introduced a speaker system to inform smokers where they should not be smoking, and it has even brought in a fruit and vegetable store to promote healthy eating, but sadly people smoke in front of it.

This issue is about much more than just mid-Yorkshire. I am calling for legislative support for all NHS trusts seeking to implement the Government’s smokeless NHS debate initiative, as laid out in the 2017 tobacco control plan for England. This is about more than simply installing no-smoking signs; it is about creating a culture that is in favour of quitting. I want this legislation to be part of a package that includes support to help smokers quit or abstain. They should receive encouragement to do so while on hospital grounds. Smoke-free policies should be communicated before appointments; staff should be given stop-smoking training; carers, families and visitors should have cessation advice; and, crucially, patients who smoke should be identified so they can be given support to stop. That is the whole package that I want to see implemented, but while we wait for legislation there are a number of things that I believe we should be doing now.

I gently say to NHS England that it would be welcome to see it produce guidance on smoke-free NHS policy, alongside implementation procedure. Such a step would strengthen the message to trusts that smoke-free policies are an essential part of their operation and would be a very welcome push towards a smoke-free NHS. I say this to Ministers: I am aware that the prevention Green Paper is on its way and this Bill might be the opportunity to implement that legislation.

At the start of my speech, I mentioned the Scottish and Welsh Governments. In Wales, legislation to ban smoking on hospital grounds is expected to be implemented this summer. In Scotland, legislation has been passed giving Ministers the power to designate a perimeter around hospital buildings within which smoking is prohibited. This Bill would be an example of this House taking a lead from the devolved Administrations where appropriate. We should never be shy of doing that. It is worth remembering that the smoking population inside hospitals is higher than it is among the general public and that illnesses can be a major factor in quitting. Let us support people in the first hours and days of kicking the habit.

I know that, for some Members, the provision of support will depend on cold, hard cash. They will be relieved to know that full implementation of smoke-free policies on the Royal College of Physicians estate would deliver a net saving to the NHS of up to £60 million within one year and greater savings in the long term. Let us not lose sight of the immediate benefits. Even following diagnosis of lung cancer, people who quit have a significantly lower risk of mortality and cancer recurrence.

Although the number of smokers is reducing, it remains a serious menace in my constituency of Batley and Spen. In Kirklees, we have a higher than average number of smokers—17.1%—and in Yorkshire it is 17%. In England, the average is 14.9%. Sadly, 12.6% of pregnant women smoke at the time of delivery in Kirklees; the national average is just over 10%. According to Public Health England, between 2015 and 2017, there were 4,439 smoking-related hospital admissions in Kirklees—again, that is above average. In the same period, there were sadly 1,942 deaths attributable to smoking in Kirklees.

The need for this measure is obvious. We still have our work cut out for us. I am not saying that the Bill will magically reduce the number of smokers. Although I am aware of the hard work carried out on cessation programmes at the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust, we all need to do our part to make hospital grounds smoke-free, take the burden off our NHS staff and create a more pleasant experience for patients and businesses alike.

This is an incredibly simple Bill of the kind introduced in Scotland and Wales. I hope it will be implemented with ease.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Tracy Brabin, Mary Creagh, Mrs Sharon Hodgson, Bambos Charalambous, Thelma Walker, Yasmin Qureshi, Paula Sherriff, Holly Lynch and Dr Rosena Allin-Khan present the Bill.

Tracy Brabin accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March, and to be printed (Bill 327).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered.

That, at this day’s sitting, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion tabled under section 13(6)(a) and 13(1)(b)(i) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 in the name of the Prime Minister not later than 7.00pm;
such questions shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; the questions may be put after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.

(Michelle Donelan.)

Mr Speaker: I have provisionally selected the following amendments in the following order: (a) in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn; (o) in the name of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, Mr Ian Blackford; (g) in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield, Dominic Grieve; (b) in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, Yvette Cooper; (j) in the name of the hon. Member for Leeds West, Rachel Reeves; (i) in the name of the right hon. Member for Meriden, Dame Caroline Spelman; and (n) in the name of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West, Sir Graham Brady. Reference may be made in debate to any of the amendments on the Order Paper, including those I have not selected.

For the benefit of right hon. and hon. Members, and of those observing our proceedings, I will set out concisely what will happen at the end of today’s debate. At 7 o’clock, I will first invite the Leader of the Opposition to move his amendment. If his amendment (a) is agreed to, amendment (o) falls, and I will invite the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield to move his amendment (g), and so on down the list. If amendment (a) is disagreed to, I will invite the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber to move his amendment (o). When amendment (o) has been decided, we will move to amendment (g), and so on down the list. If amendment (b) is agreed to, amendment (j) falls. At the end, I will put to the House the original question in the name of the Prime Minister, as amended, if amendments have been made, or in its original form, if no amendments have been agreed. To move the main motion, I call the Prime Minister.

1.51 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I beg to move,

That this House, in accordance with the provisions of section 13(6)(a) and 13(11)(b)(i) and 13(13)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, has considered the Written Statement titled “Statement under Section 13(4) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018” and made on 21 January 2019, and the Written Statement titled “Statement under Section 13(11)(a) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018” and made on 24 January 2019.

Over the past few weeks, this House has left no one in any doubt about what it does not want. It does not want to leave the EU without a deal, because that would hurt our economy and disrupt people’s lives. It does not want to hold a general election, because it would waste time, increase division and solve none of the problems we face. Indeed, this House renewed its confidence in Her Majesty’s Government a fortnight ago. Neither do I see anything approaching a majority across the House to hold a second referendum. Indeed, the leaders of the so-called “People’s Vote” campaign obviously agree with me, because they declined even to table an amendment
to put that into effect. I also accept, however, that this House does not want the deal I put before it in the form it currently exists. The vote was decisive, and I listened. The world knows what this House does not want. Today, we need to send an emphatic message about what we do want. I believe that that must include honouring the votes of our fellow citizens and completing the democratic process that began when this House voted overwhelmingly to hold the referendum and then voted to trigger article 50 and that saw the vast majority of us elected on manifestos pledging to see Brexit through.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): At the November European Council, the Prime Minister pleaded with other European leaders, telling them that her deal was not only the best deal but the only possible deal—a statement she repeated time and again, including in this House. We now hear from her spokespersons at No. 10 that she wants to rip up the withdrawal agreement and open up the whole process again. Why would other European leaders agree to that?

**The Prime Minister:** I gently suggest that the hon. Gentleman listen to my speech before asking questions of that sort.

Seeing Brexit through means reaching an agreement that works for this country and our people and for the other 27 nations of the European Union, including our nearest neighbour, Ireland. It means listening to the message being sent by the great manufacturing firms that employ millions of our constituents that they need an implementation period and a free trade area with our nearest market. It means protecting the security partnerships that keep us safe. It means caring about every part of this United Kingdom, including the people of Northern Ireland, who should be just as much the concern of each one of us in this Union Parliament as their fellow citizens in England, Scotland and Wales. We need a good deal that sets us on course for a bright future.

That is what I believe this House wants. It is what this Government want; it is what I want; and it is what the British people want. Today, we have the chance to show the European Union what it will take to get a deal through this House of Commons and to move beyond the confusion, division and uncertainty that now hangs over us and on to the bright, new, close, open relationship we want to build and can build with our European friends in the years ahead.

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): The Prime Minister knows that her Treasury analysis shows that every single plan for Brexit makes us poorer. If she is confident of her plan, will she publish it?

**The Prime Minister:** We published an economic analysis, along with other analyses, and they showed that the Government’s proposal was the best deal for honouring the referendum and providing protection for jobs and the economy in this country. I know the hon. Gentleman does not agree, because he does not want to honour the referendum result, but I think it is our duty to honour it.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The Prime Minister has had some strong words for the House for not forming an alternative consensus to her deal, but she is now supporting the Brady amendment, and so will be voting against her own deal. How does she expect the House to provide an alternative when she is voting against her own deal?

**The Prime Minister:** Time and again, Opposition Members have stood up and asked me to listen to the House. Now I come to the House having listened to the House, and Members say I should not have.

The way to make clear what it will take to agree a deal is to reject the amendments that state and restate once again what we do not want and back instead the amendment that shows what this House needs in order to agree a deal.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The Prime Minister is absolutely right about honouring the referendum result. Millions of people across the north of England voted in huge numbers to leave the EU, and many of them went out and re-elected Labour MPs who stood on a solemn commitment to make good on the referendum result. Is it not the case that if any Member of Parliament representing a northern leave constituency votes for amendment (b) this evening, they will be voting to dishonour the referendum result?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is up to every Member to remember the manifesto on which they were elected. Some 80% of the votes cast at the general election were cast for parties that said they would honour the referendum result, and that is what we need to do, and we can honour it by showing tonight what it will take to enable this House to agree a deal on the basis of which we can leave the EU.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Prime Minister now no longer favours the backstop arrangement she negotiated and instead is in favour of alternative arrangements. Will she set out for the House what those alternative arrangements are?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman refers to alternative arrangements as if it is a phrase that has suddenly come into use. As I will mention later, the deal we negotiated allows for alternative arrangements.

I would like to turn to the amendments. I appreciate the spirit of the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). I, too, want to avoid leaving without a deal. I have heard the concerns and anxieties of businesses and families around the country who worry about what would happen if we left without a deal, and I do not want to put at risk all the hard work that has seen this Government deliver record high employment; the joint lowest unemployment in 45 years and wages growing at their fastest rate in a decade.

That said, my right hon. Friend’s amendment is missing the other half of the equation, for unless we are to end up with no Brexit at all, the only way to avoid no deal is to agree a deal. That is why I want to go back to Brussels with the clearest possible mandate to secure a deal that this House can support. That means sending the clearest possible message not about what the House does not want, but about what we do want.
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: I am just going to make a little more progress. I am always generous in taking interventions, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

I know that some Members have been concerned that this debate could be the last chance to vote on their desire to avoid a no deal, so I want to reassure the House that it is not. We will bring a revised deal back to the House for a second meaningful vote as soon as we possibly can.

Pete Wishart: Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Gentleman wants to comment on what I am saying about the process that the Government will follow, I suggest that he should wait until I have completed what I am saying. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me very gently say to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and his hon. Friend, the Member for Na h-Eileanan an lár (Angus Brendan MacNeil) that both of them are very senior figures in the land, as Chairs of important Select Committees of the House, and they should behave with the decorum that befits their high status.

The Prime Minister: First of all, as I have said, we will bring a revised deal back to this House for a second meaningful vote as soon as we possibly can. While we will want the House to support that deal, if it did not, we would—just as before—table an amendable motion for debate the next day. Furthermore, if we have not brought a revised deal back to this House by Wednesday 13 February, we will make a statement and, again, table an amendable motion for debate the next day. So the House will have a further opportunity to revisit this question of leaving without a deal. Today, we can and must instead focus all our efforts on securing a good deal with the EU that enables us to leave in a smooth and orderly way on 29 March.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Prime Minister is, of course, right that there is more clarity about what the House does not want than about what it does want, but to get that clarity about what the House wants, why will she not agree to a series of indicative votes on all the substantive options before us—not the process but the substance, including a comprehensive customs union?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady and others—indeed, Members on her party’s Front Bench—had the opportunity to table indicative votes. Did they do so? No. They tabled something that said, “Well, what’s the answer? Let’s have a few more votes in the future, possibly, maybe, if we think that it might be useful at some stage.”

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): This morning, there was some kite-flying about a so-called Tory Brexit compromise that would still take Scotland out of the EU, would probably require an extension of article 50, and proposes what has already been ruled out. Does that not further emphasise the fact that this Prime Minister’s Brexit policy has been about the Tory party, first, last and always?

The Prime Minister: My Brexit policy, and the policy of the Government, has been about the vote that took place in 2016 in the referendum and about delivering on leaving the European Union.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that it is important for us to honour the referendum and the vote of 2016? Will she rule out any extension of article 50 and any wrecking tactics from the Labour party and make sure that we leave on 29 March?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree that we need to deliver on the result of the referendum. Let me add that when people talk about things such as delaying article 50, that does not resolve the issue of what deal we should have in leaving the European Union. What we can do today is send a clear message to Brussels about what the House wants to see changing in the withdrawal agreement in order to be able to support it.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister agreed that it is important for us to honour the referendum and the vote of 2016. However, there was some kite-flying about a so-called Tory Brexit compromise that would take Scotland out of the EU, would require an extension of article 50, and proposes what has already been ruled out, and that does not further emphasise the fact that this Prime Minister’s Brexit policy has been about the Tory party, first, last and always?

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that Conservative Members find the hon. Gentleman mildly provocative—[Laughter]—and no, he is not in an isolated category in that regard, but he must be heard.
Pete Wishart: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I shall continue to be mildly provocative, if I can, by asking the following question. This is an agreement with the European Union.

What happens when the European Union says no to the Prime Minister again?

The Prime Minister: The first step in all this is for the House to make clear what it wants to see in relation to changes. The hon. Gentleman says that he wants me to get on with it and actually talk about what I want to talk about. If he were not jumping up and down all the time, I might be able to get on with it.

Let me now turn to the amendments from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). I understand the concerns that led to the tabling of the amendments, but I have the most profound doubts about the consequences to which they would lead.

Both amendments seek to create and exploit mechanisms that would allow Parliament to usurp the proper role of the Executive. Such actions would be unprecedented and could have far-reaching and long-term implications for the way in which the United Kingdom is governed and the balance of powers and responsibilities in our democratic institutions. I am sure that, as former Ministers of the Crown, both Members must know that. So, while I do not question their sincerity in trying to avoid a no-deal Brexit, to seek to achieve that through such means is, I believe, deeply misguided and not a responsible course of action.

Furthermore, neither amendment actually delivers on the best way of avoiding no deal, which is, as I have said, for the House to approve a deal with the European Union. The amendment tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend would be unprecedented and could have far-reaching and long-term implications for the way in which the United Kingdom is governed and the balance of powers and responsibilities in our democratic institutions. I am sure that, as former Ministers of the Crown, both Members must know that. So, while I do not question their sincerity in trying to avoid a no-deal Brexit, to seek to achieve that through such means is, I believe, deeply misguided and not a responsible course of action.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister not understand that the reason we are in this mess is that she chose to go and negotiate without first commanding the support of a majority in the House? Does she also not understand that, whether we are commanding the support of a majority in the House or not, the concerns that led to the tabling of the amendments, apart from the Leader of the Opposition, who did not want to come and talk to me, I shall mention a number of those issues later in my speech, but one of them, which has been raised consistently by Members, is the backstop. We have an opportunity to give a clear message to the European Union on this matter today, and I also say to my right hon. and learned Friend that I am sure he has thought through very carefully the long-term implications of the moves proposed tonight in the amendments that he and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford have put forward and the implications they have for the relationship between the Executive and Parliament in the future.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Does the Prime Minister also get the idea that the European Union too wants to do a deal with the United Kingdom? We have a €95 billion deficit with it; the Germans sell us 850,000 cars every year; we buy 20% of all the prosecco produced in Italy: does she agree with me that the European Union wishes to carry on trading with the United Kingdom in the way it currently does?

The Prime Minister: I am going to reference this later on, and I think there is a willingness on the other side—the European Union—to agree a deal with the UK, but what it clearly said when the meaningful vote was lost was that it wanted to know what the UK wanted to see happening in relation to the deal, and that is an opportunity that we have today.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I will give way to the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and then I will make some progress.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful to the Prime Minister for allowing me to intervene at this early stage.

The Prime Minister is trying to encourage this House to vote for an amendment that uses the words “alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border” on the island of Ireland. Forgive me, Prime Minister, if I say that those words are nebulous. They are nebulous; the Prime Minister has a duty to spell out to this House before we vote what those alternative arrangements are, and how on earth the other 27 EU member states are expected to agree to this revised arrangement before Brexit date on 29 March.
The Prime Minister: The amendment standing in the name of my hon. Friend, the Member for Altrincham and Sale West and other right hon. and hon. Members does indeed reference the issue of “alternative arrangements”. That term is recognised in the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration in terms of the deal, and I am going on to reference a number of options that have been brought forward in relation to that particular term.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I am going to make some progress.

The amendment in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford does not rule out no deal; it simply delays the point of decision, and the policy dilemmas, the choices, the trade-offs that we face as a Parliament will not go away if we postpone exit day. Her amendment offers absolutely no positive suggestions to address them. Furthermore, I believe that the EU is very unlikely to agree to extend article 50 without a credible plan for how we are going to approve a deal. So whatever the right hon. Lady’s intention, I think the practical consequences of her amendment would be not to rule out no deal, but to delay Brexit, and that is not a course of action that this House should support.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) rose—

The Prime Minister: I will of course give way to the right hon. Lady.

Yvette Cooper: If the Prime Minister does not get agreement either from the EU or this Parliament to her next course of action, is she ruling out any extension of article 50?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear, as I said earlier, about the process we will follow: if we get a deal we will bring it back to this House, or if we have not got a deal we will give this House opportunities through amendable motions to state its view as to what should happen at that point in time.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that throughout the history of the European Union it has always worked to deadlines, and the British people now want us to get on and finish the job they have given us?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has pointed out and particularly for the fact that, as he said, the British people just want to see this done. They want us to leave; they want us to leave with a deal.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: I will give way to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, as I have referenced her.

Yvette Cooper: It is really important that the House has some clarity on this. If the Prime Minister is saying that there will be future votes in which Parliament can make some decisions about no deal or not, she will know that her credibility is very limited because she said there would be a vote in December and then pulled it at the last minute. We therefore need some clarity from her now: is she saying that if Parliament votes for an extension of article 50 to avoid no deal on 29 March she will respect that?

The Prime Minister: There is a very simple point: extending article 50 does not rule out no deal. [Interruption.] No, I am sorry; I have said this before, but I apologise to the House as I am going to repeat it again. There are two ways in which it is possible to rule out no deal. One is by revoking article 50 and not leaving. That is the SNP’s view, but it is not my view, it is not the Government’s view, and I believe that it is not the view of the British people and is not the view of the majority of Members of this House. The other way to ensure we do not leave with no deal is to agree a deal. The stage we are at at the moment is that the House of Commons has rejected the deal that the Government agreed with the European Union when we brought that back, and it rejected it with our having achieved further reassurances; I am going to go on to say what I believe is now required by this House, from the conversations and discussions I have had with right hon. and hon. Members of this House. As I have set out—

Yvette Cooper: Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady wants to intervene again; I will take another intervention from her, and then if she will excuse me I will make some progress.

Yvette Cooper: I am very grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way again, but I am simply trying to understand what she is saying. She cannot have it both ways: she cannot be saying that she absolutely will leave on 29 March in all circumstances, whatever happens, and then simultaneously say that there will be an opportunity for Parliament to have some future votes and decide what happens next if there is no deal. The question here is whether or not she would ever contemplate any extension of article 50 to get a bit more time to sort things out to avoid no deal—yes or no.

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier in my speech, we will bring a revised deal back to this House for a second meaningful vote as soon as we possibly can. If it were not supported by the House, we would table an amendable motion for debate the next day, and if we have not brought a revised deal back to this House by Wednesday 13 February we will make a statement and again table an amendable motion for debate the next day. The right hon. Lady references the timetable up to 29 March: actually this House voted for that timetable when it voted to trigger article 50.

I would like to move on to the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: No, I am going to make some progress.

Ms Eagle rose—

The Prime Minister: No.
We should not indulge the amendment from the Leader of the Opposition. First he wanted a comprehensive customs union, then it was a new customs union and now it is a permanent customs union. Last week, I asked him whether he means accepting the common external tariff, accepting the common commercial policy, accepting the Union customs code, or accepting EU state aid rules: he had no answers then; he has no answers now; he hasn’t got a clue. He is still facing both ways on whether Labour would keep freedom of movement, and last night he whipped his MPs to oppose the Bill that would end free movement and introduce a skills-based system. And he is still facing both ways on a second referendum: his amendment calls for legislation for a public vote, but we still do not know whether he would use it or what the question would be.

I know that many Labour voters and MPs, and others in the Labour movement, are frustrated by the Leader of the Opposition’s approach. It is surely time for him to step up to the responsibility of being Leader of the Opposition and finally sit down with me and talk about how we can secure support in this House for a deal. As I said last week, he has been willing to sit down with Hamas, Hezbollah and the IRA without preconditions; it is time he did something in our national interest, not against it.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab) rose—

The Prime Minister: No, I am going to make some progress.

None of the amendments I have addressed so far will ensure that we deliver Brexit. Instead, they simply provide more arguments against action and more reasons to stand still. Rather than setting out a plan to make Brexit work, they create further delay. And delay without stand still. Rather than setting out a plan to make more arguments against action and more reasons to ensure that we deliver Brexit. Instead, they simply provide progress.

The message has been unequivocal: this House wants changes to the backstop before it will back a deal.

The third point that has become clear from discussions is that what is supposed to be a temporary arrangement could in fact become permanent. The message has been unequivocal: this House wants changes to the backstop before it will back a deal.

Mr Dhesi: A clear and concise message needs to be given to the EU and to our nation. The Prime Minister does not want no deal, business in Slough and in the rest of the country do not want no deal, and the unions, which she has just mentioned, do not want no deal, so what is the problem in putting that down in black and white?

The Prime Minister: In order to deliver what the hon. Gentleman wants and ensure that we do not leave with no deal, we need to agree a deal. What we are doing today is looking at a series of amendments. I will come on shortly to an amendment that actually sets out a clear view from this House that we can take to the European Union and work to ensure that we can leave with a deal.

The third point that has become clear from discussions is that we must address the concerns of this House over the nature of the Northern Ireland backstop. The fundamental concern is that what is supposed to be a temporary arrangement could in fact become permanent. The message has been unequivocal: this House wants changes to the backstop before it will back a deal.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: No, I have said to the hon. Lady that I am going to make progress.

I am not prepared to stand still and put at risk either the Brexit that the people of this country voted for or the economic success they have worked so hard to secure. After this House gave its verdict on the withdrawal agreement, I stood at this Dispatch Box and pledged to work with the House to determine what steps to take next, and in the two weeks since, I have done just that. (Interruption.) Labour Front Benchers say that I have not done that. Actually, the only people I have not been able to talk to about this are the Labour party’s Front Benchers, because they decided not to come.

I have listened to the House, met MPs from all parties and spoken with and listened to Members of the European Parliament, Heads of the devolved Administrations, senior trade unionists and the leaders of Britain’s biggest businesses. From those conversations, it is obvious that three key changes are needed.

First, we must be more flexible, open and inclusive in how we engage this House in our approach to negotiating our future partnership with the European Union. Secondly, we must and will embed the strongest possible protections for workers’ rights and the environment. The Government will not allow the UK leaving the EU to result in any lowering of standards in relation to employment, environmental protection or health and safety. Furthermore, we will ensure that, after exit day, the House has the opportunity to consider any measure approved by EU institutions that strengthens any of those protections. As I have set out before, we will consider legislation where necessary to ensure that those commitments are binding. To that end, in the coming days, we will have further talks with the trade unions and MPs across the House to flesh out exactly how we can ensure that their concerns on those fronts are met. My message to Britain’s workers, in factories, offices, warehouses and right across our country, is that you can rest assured that the Government will deliver for you.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: No, I am going to explain the position. That message has come from Conservative Back Benchers, Opposition Members and our confidence and supply partners in the DUP. That is why I believe it is in all our interests for the House to back the amendment tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Altrincham and Sale West and for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and others.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: No, I am going to explain. This amendment will give the mandate I need to negotiate with Brussels an arrangement that commands a majority in this House—one that ensures we leave with a deal and addresses the House’s concerns, while guaranteeing no return to the hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

What I am talking about is not a further exchange of letters but a significant and legally binding change to the withdrawal agreement. Negotiating such a change will not be easy. It will involve reopening the withdrawal agreement—a move for which I know there is limited appetite among our European partners. But I believe that with a mandate from this House, and supported by
[The Prime Minister]

The Attorney General, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, I can secure such a change in advance of our departure from the EU.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I welcome what the Prime Minister has said about the need to address the issue of the Northern Ireland backstop, which she is quite right to emphasise as the primary problem. I also welcome the fact that she has said in terms that she will go back and seek the reopening of the withdrawal agreement. She can be assured of our support in trying to find a solution that avoids any hard border on the island of Ireland as well as any borders within the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for the clarity with which the right hon. Gentleman has set out that position. We remain absolutely committed as a Government to ensuring that we have no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and that any proposals accepted and put forward by this House maintain our precious Union.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I agree with the Prime Minister that the best way to avoid no deal is to put an agreement in place. She will be aware that a surprising combination of Members with very different Brexit views have come together to come up with some proposals. We are very grateful to her for the time she has given to engage with us. Will she undertake to ask her officials to consider those proposals seriously and to put them on the table as a possible way of fleshing out the alternative arrangements?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend anticipates what I was going to say. We will be focusing on delivering specific changes that will address the concerns of the House, and I am looking at a range of ways to achieve that. As my right hon. Friend has just said, she and my hon. Friends the Members for Wycombe (Mr Baker), for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and others have worked to bring forward a serious proposal that we are engaging with sincerely and positively.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: As I have referenced my right hon. Friend in my speech, I will give way to him.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con) rose—

The Prime Minister: I say to all Members of this House that I have already been very generous in taking interventions. I am sure that many Members wish to contribute to the debate, so I will make progress.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and thank her for her very clear assurances that the withdrawal agreement text will be reopened and that she will consider what has been called the Malthouse compromise. May I ask for one more promise, namely that any further detailed agreement will come back and will not be deemed to have been ratified by the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady)?

The Prime Minister: I give my hon. Friend that assurance: it has to and will come back to this House. Legally speaking, ratification of the agreement can take place only in the act of passing the WAB—the withdrawal agreement Bill. That will be the ratification moment for any arrangements.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The Prime Minister referred repeatedly to protecting workers’ rights post Brexit, but may I take her back to 2017 and my Bill, which was specifically about protecting workers’ rights when we leave the European Union on 29 March? Why was that measure not adopted at the time, and if she is so committed to it, will she meet me to discuss those elements of the Bill that she is prepared to adopt?

The Prime Minister: We are looking at ways in which we can give that assurance in relation to workers’ rights. As I said, we are looking at when legislation would be appropriate and where it would be necessary. I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to go through that issue.

I want to complete what I was saying to my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). We will indeed engage seriously and positively with the proposals that she has put forward, which were also referenced by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset. The crucial concept that we see within this amendment is the concept of alternative arrangements. As I have already said in this speech, that has already been accepted by the EU as a way out of the backstop. I commend my right hon. and hon. Friends for their willingness to find a solution and I look forward to working with them over the coming days. A number of other colleagues have also suggested ways to achieve that aim, such as securing a time limit to the backstop, or a unilateral exit clause, which we will of course study...
closely as well. While there are obviously details that need to be worked through, the fact that leading figures from different sides of the argument are coming together to develop proposals shows how much progress has been made over the past few weeks.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the Prime Minister recognise that there is no solution in chasing fantasies? The EU has ruled this kind of option out many times. We cannot have an insurance policy based on a technology that does not exist. Will she not recognise that what she is chasing here are heated-up fantasies that have already been rejected by the EU and depend on technologies that do not exist?

**The Prime Minister**: Members across the House have put forward a number of proposals on how this issue can be addressed. They are not indulging in fantasies—they are coming forward with serious proposals on which this Government will work with them.

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): On the question of our control over our laws, to honour the referendum, will my right hon. Friend give instructions to make certain that in any future withdrawal and implementation Bill, there will be an express repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, so as to dovetail with section 1 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which we have passed?

**The Prime Minister**: As my hon. Friend knows, in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, we repealed the 1972 Act. It would be necessary to replicate the impact of some aspects of that Act for the purposes of the implementation period, but I certainly take what my hon. Friend has said. Within the withdrawal agreement Bill that we will need to bring before the House, we will make absolutely clear the arrangements for ensuring that the European Communities Act, and its impacts, do not go beyond the end of the implementation period.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**The Prime Minister**: I will take more interventions in a little while, but I want to make the point that the essence of any negotiation is to find a mutually acceptable solution. That is the spirit in which both sides have consistently approached these negotiations and that is the spirit in which I will engage with our partners, if this amendment passes.

Some say that there is no point even trying to achieve any change—I am hearing that from some interventions from sedentary positions, and from elsewhere—and that the EU simply will not budge under any circumstances, but in the two years since this House voted to trigger article 50, the EU has made concessions in many areas of the negotiations where people said no ground would ever be given. Today, neither side in this negotiation wants to see the UK leave without a deal. The simple fact is that the deal I reached with the EU has been rejected by this House. In response, the EU has asked us what we want and what this Parliament will accept, and this is Parliament’s opportunity to tell them.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Prime Minister agree that, rather than chasing a fantasy, there is now an opportunity, which Michel Barnier himself presented when he told the Irish Government that the EU would look for ways of ensuring that checks could take place without any infrastructure along the border? He even talked about paperless and decentralised arrangements. That is what the EU is saying, so it is obviously not a fantasy, but something we have in common.

**The Prime Minister**: Those are exactly the issues that we want to work on, and several proposals have been put forward. However, what matters today is that Parliament makes it clear to the EU that the backstop is the issue that needs to be dealt with. This is Parliament’s opportunity to respond to the EU, which has said that it wants us to tell it what we want. This is our opportunity to do that. This is not the second meaningful vote. As I have said and repeated, we will bring a revised deal back to the House for just such a vote as soon as possible.

A vote for amendment (n) is a vote to tell Brussels that the current nature of the backstop is the key reason the House cannot support this deal, as many hon. Members have said to me, the media and their constituents over the past few weeks. A vote against that amendment does the opposite. It tells the EU that, despite what people may have said in speeches, tweets and newspaper columns, the backstop is not the problem. It risks sending a message that we are not serious about delivering a Brexit that works for Britain.

**Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): The right hon. Lady is not the first Prime Minister to discover that the Conservative party is un-uniteable and unleadable on Europe. Many others have learnt that lesson. However, as she celebrates having people on different sides of the argument coming together to support an amendment, does she not realise that she has been able to get them to agree to it only because it is so nebulous as to be meaningless?

**The Prime Minister**: If the hon. Gentleman wants to look for different views about the issue, perhaps he can talk to some of his colleagues. He might try to get the Leader of the Opposition to focus on a detailed proposal for what the Labour party thinks.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): I think that Conservative Members are all trying to find a way of getting a deal, and I have been impressed with what the Prime Minister has said today. We will send her back to Brussels to reopen the withdrawal agreement, but will she assure the House that, if we do not agree with what she comes back with, we will still have the right to vote against it?

**The Prime Minister**: Yes, of course the House will have the right to decide whether it agrees with the agreement that emerges. However, I hope that, when we bring a revised agreement to the House—as I am sure that we will be able to—my hon. Friend will look at it carefully before he determines how to vote.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**The Prime Minister**: I am conscious of the length of time I have been at the Dispatch Box. Hon. Members want to speak and I will now conclude.
Since the draft withdrawal agreement was published, I have come to the House to discuss it more than half a dozen times. I have been on the Front Bench for many hours of debate, taking hundreds of questions and interventions from hon. Members, and I have been listening.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con) rose—

**The Prime Minister:** I indicated that I would not take any more interventions and that I was completing my speech. I am sure that my hon. Friend will have an opportunity, if she catches the Speaker’s eye, to speak later.

I have witnessed division and discord, and I have seen passion and anger on all sides, but in the two weeks since the House rejected the withdrawal agreement, I have sensed a growing recognition of the task that has been entrusted to us. Members on all sides have begun to focus on what really matters: delivering the Brexit that Britain voted for while protecting our economy and our people.

We can increasingly see where this consensus lies, and I believe that we are within reach of a deal that this House can stand behind, but the days ahead are crucial. When I go back to Brussels to seek the changes this House demands, I need the strongest possible support behind me. Most of the amendments before us do not provide that. They create a cacophony of voices when this House needs to speak as one. I will never stop reminding us all that this whole process was secured by the result of the referendum, not to mention the fact that the vote was delayed on 11 December, which has now become inevitable that the House votes on options that prevent leaving with no deal, but whatever happens in the votes that follow, it has now become inevitable that the

This is a vital issue that affects the future direction of our country and the future facing all of our constituents. It determines the jobs and living standards of our people, the rights of European Union citizens living in Britain who have been deeply stressed by this situation—as have British citizens living across the continent of Europe—our place in the world and our participation and co-operation in Europe-wide projects on issues as vital as security, counter-terrorism and climate change.

Our job must be to bring people together. No matter how anyone in this House campaigned in the referendum, we cannot wish away the votes of 17 million people who voted to leave, any more than we can ignore the concerns of the 16 million who voted to remain. We must have in our minds the views right across the country.

It is therefore right that Members represent their constituents in deciding the way forward on implementing the result of the referendum, but in delivering theresult, we have to unite people so as to create further divisions, stoke xenophobia or allow racism to rear its ugly head in our society. Many communities across this country have been neglected for far too long, lacking decent investment and with too few—

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The person who has the Floor chooses whether and, if so, when to give way. That is the situation. It is very clear, and it cannot be contradicted. That is all there is to it.

Jeremy Corbyn: What I was saying was—

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: I will give way later to a small number of people. [Interruption.] Listen, the reason why this debate is so short is that the Government decided to take an hour out of it to make a statement that could have been made on any other day, not to mention the fact that the vote was delayed on 11 December, which wound down the clock still further.

Many communities across this country have been neglected for far too long, lacking decent investment and with too few secure and well-paid jobs and too little new industrial development. These are not issues that face Britain alone; they would be recognisable in communities all across Europe, where many people face exactly the same problems.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Contradictory, confused or claptrap. Which of those c’s best describes the right hon. Gentleman’s policy at the current time?

Jeremy Corbyn: This is a serious debate, and I do not think the hon. Gentleman’s policy would be recognisable in communities all across Europe, where many people face exactly the same problems.
Government will have to extend article 50 in any scenario. If amendments intended to rule out no deal are defeated, and if this Government are serious about keeping the threat of no deal on the table, they are not even close—not even close—to being prepared, and the exit date would have to be extended.

Even if the Prime Minister’s deal were somehow to achieve a majority in this House next month, there is no chance that the necessary primary legislation and an extensive catalogue of secondary legislation—I believe there are over 600 statutory instruments—could clear this place between now and 29 March.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I was saying, the fault lies exclusively with the Prime Minister, who missed her own deadline to have a deal agreed by October, and she still suffered the worst defeat of any Government in British history.

Angela Smith: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Dhesi: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Hon. Members: “Oh!”

Mr Dhesi: I can see that I am very well liked here. Does my right hon. Friend agree that clear, close and collaborative describes the relationship proposed by his amendment? That is why we need a customs union. The unions, Labour members and others are telling us that we need a customs union with our neighbours.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and, of course, he is right. If we are to protect jobs and industries and maintain living standards, there has to be a customs union.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has just reiterated, as his amendment references, the need for a customs union. Will he now tell the House whether he means accepting the common commercial policy, accepting the common external tariffs, accepting the Union customs code—it is no use asking the shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union—and accepting the EU’s state aid rules?

Jeremy Corbyn: Obviously a customs union would be negotiated, would be inclusive and would be designed to ensure that our jobs and investment are protected, that there is frictionless and seamless trade with the European Union and that we have a say in future trade arrangements—something the Prime Minister has absolutely failed to achieve. The fault for not achieving it lies absolutely with the Prime Minister. She claimed she would have a deal agreed by October, then she delayed the vote by a month, and she still suffered the worst—

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The former Foreign Secretary does not seem to be very well versed in the traditions of the House of Commons and debate. [ Interruption. ] Order. I am telling the right hon. Gentleman what the position is, and he will learn from me. When he seeks to intervene, he waits to hear whether the person on his or her feet is giving way, and the Leader of the Opposition is not giving way. In that case, with the very greatest of respect, it is for the right hon. Gentleman to know his place, which is in his seat.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I was saying, the fault lies exclusively with the Prime Minister, who missed her own deadline to have a deal agreed by October, and she still suffered the worst defeat of any Government in British history.

Angela Smith: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon).

Jim McMahon: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. [ Interruption. ] I am not sure how people in this House believe this will be received by the public watching on TV, but I have to say that the public are sick of the childish antics of people in this House and they want us to come together to find a way through this mess. There are thousands of different views on, and variations of, what people felt and thought they voted for in that referendum, but the one thing we can be certain of is that the referendum leaflet that went to every household in this country did not make any mention of leaving the customs union. Why can we not find agreement on that?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The point he makes about the way in which this House debates these matters is important. He has led a local authority, Oldham, brought people together and brought communities together, and achieved things—that is something this Government have lamentably failed to do. If the—

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) may have inadvertently misled the House. He claimed that no one had said during the EU referendum that we would be leaving the customs union. In fact, the former Prime Minister said that—

Mr Speaker: Order. Resume your seat, Mr Fabricant.

I know you are trying to help the House and I appreciate that.—your public spiritedness is well known throughout the House and across the nation—but the hon. Gentleman referred to a leaflet and the contents thereof. Whatever the merits or demerits of that argument, it is not a matter of order for the Chair. It is a matter of political debate, as your grinning countenance suggests you are well aware.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I just ask: is the Prime Minister—

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope it is a genuine point of order.

Rebecca Pow: It is actually an observation really—

Mr Speaker: Order. Resume your seat. [ Interruption. ] With no disrespect to the hon. Lady, I am not interested in observations. [ Interruption. ] Order. I am not debating it. I am telling you what the situation is. [ Interruption. ] It is no good laughing, chuckling away as though it is a matter of great amusement. It is a matter of fact: points
of order, yes; observations, no. / Interruption. / No, the hon. Lady has helpfully explained that she had an observation to make. We are very grateful.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman does know parliamentary procedure. Point of order, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a genuine point of order. I wonder whether you could guide the House on how Members refuse interventions, because I think the reason there is so much noise is that it is not clear whether the right hon. Gentleman has heard the request for an intervention or not. Your guidance would be extraordinarily helpful.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. If I understand his point of order correctly, the answer to it is that the customary method of acknowledging the intention of another Member to intervene, and perhaps the acceptance of that intervention, is a gesticulation with the hand, at which, among other things, the hon. Gentleman excels. / Interruption. / No, no, I think the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) is a bit confused; it is not about the fact that someone seeking to intervene gesticulates, but the fact that the Member on his or her feet signals acceptance. That has not happened and therefore the Leader of the Opposition has the Floor. The position is extraordinarily straightforward.

Angela Smith: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do wonder, with all the noise in the Chamber and with my being directly behind the Leader of the Opposition, whether my requests for an intervention may not have been heard.

Mr Speaker: I cannot claim to have known that, but I think now that the hon. Lady has issued what might be called a public information notice. We are aware of it, but it is a matter for the Leader of the Opposition to decide. I hope the hon. Lady is satisfied with her efforts.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. / Interruption. / Calm down. I gave a ruling in relation to the point of order, and “Further to that point of order” does not arise.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Is the Prime Minister seriously telling this House that we have to wait until 13 February—

Angela Smith rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: And put—[HON. MEMBERS: “She’s behind you.”] I can well understand what the Tory MPs are trying to do here. They do not want to hear the debate. They do not want to be part of this debate. They—

Mr Speaker: Order. Many people have talked in recent times about the importance of respect in the Chamber. / Interruption. / No, no, no, I do not require any help from the Government Chief Whip. Let me gently say to him that he has a challenging task, which he discharges to the best of his capabilities, and the House and the nation are grateful to him. The idea that he needs to advise the Leader of the Opposition or the Speaker on how to discharge their responsibilities is, frankly, beyond credulity. He has got one job to do. People will make their assessment of whether and how well he does it. Don’t try doing somebody else’s job. With respect, sir, it is way beyond you.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in accordance with the rules of this House that the Leader of the Opposition takes interventions only from male members of his party?

Mr Speaker: The answer is that there is no breach of rules whatsoever. The hon. Lady has made her own point, in her own way, and I acknowledge it. No breach of rules has taken place. Order has been maintained. That is clear to me and to the professional advisers to the Chair as well, and I think the hon. Lady knows it. However, she has made her own point, in her own inimitable way.

Jeremy Corbyn: I did take an intervention from the Prime Minister, Mr Speaker. Perhaps the hon. Lady had not noticed that.

Is the Prime Minister seriously telling the House to wait until 13 February and put its faith in her doing negotiations in a couple of weeks that she has failed to do in the past two years? One really wonders how many more ceremonial baubles and promises of ermine will be handed out in vain in an attempt to cajole Conservative MPs to vote for a deal that has been overwhelmingly rejected by this House. The Prime Minister says that a second referendum would be like asking the public to vote again until they give the right answer, but so far that is precisely what she is asking this House to do.

Labour will today back amendments that attempt to rule out this Government’s reckless option of allowing the UK to crash out without a deal. Everyone bar the Prime Minister accepts this would be disastrous. The CBI says:

“The projected impact”—

of no deal

“on the UK economy would be devastating”.

Just yesterday, the Federation of Small Businesses called on Members of this House to block no deal. The TUC, representing millions of workers, is also opposed to no deal, as its general secretary, Frances O’Grady, reiterated to me last week. Every Opposition party in this House is opposed to no deal. Many Conservative Members, even Front-Bench and Cabinet Conservative Members, are opposed to no deal. Let me quote the Chancellor, who said recently:

“I clearly do not believe that making a choice to leave without a deal would be a responsible thing to do”.

So, presumably, he too wants no deal ruled out.
Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am making progress. The Home Secretary has gone further and called for a free vote on the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend, the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). The Labour party will back that amendment tonight, because to crash out without a deal would be deeply damaging for industry and the economy—that is why the Chancellor says it would be irresponsible. I say to my right hon. Friend now that in backing her amendment, we are backing a short window of three months to allow time for renegotiation.

Angela Smith rose—

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Yvette Cooper: I want to address the point that my right hon. Friend has raised about my amendment and I do not want to cut across a very difficult wider issue. On his point about the amendment, I reassure my right hon. Friend that the purpose of the amendment and the Bill is not to fix any particular time for any extension, or even to decide now what an extension of article 50 should be; it is simply to give the House the ability to do so at the end of February. I agree that nobody wants to see any unnecessary delays.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my right hon. Friend for those remarks and the spirit in which she made them. Her amendment quite clearly has the effect of ruling out no deal on 29 March. Surely that should be good and important for this House. It will not be any comfort, after 29 March, to say, “I told you so,” when the lorries are backing up on the M20, cancer patients cannot get medicines and prices are rising in our shops. Tonight, we have the opportunity to take no deal off the table.

When the Prime Minister invited party leaders for talks, I said to her that she must first remove the threat of no deal. If the House today votes to remove the immediate threat of crashing out without a deal on 29 March, as I fervently hope it does and will, I will be happy to meet the Prime Minister to discuss a sensible solution that works for the whole country—which is what the Labour party wants to achieve.

Many of the amendments tabled, including those in the names of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), and of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), advocate delaying article 50 to give Parliament more time to break the impasse and avoid the dangers of no deal. If the House votes for any of those amendments, the Prime Minister must accept that an extension to article 50 is a responsible measure to allow time for real renegotiation and to find a deal that can win the support of this House. It will mean that no deal is off the table and that the red lines must change.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am making progress, if I may.

The primary part of Labour’s amendment is about finding a workable solution. That means a new customs union, a strong single market deal and no race to the bottom on workers’ rights, on environmental protections and standards or on consumer standards. The EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier has been clear that “unanimously the European Council...have always said that if the UK chooses to shift its red lines in future...and go beyond a simple free trade agreement...then the European Union will be immediately ready to...give a favourable response.”

We understand that just this weekend the EU Commission President told the Prime Minister that accepting the case for a permanent customs union would help to solve the issue of the backstop arrangement. Indeed, Ireland’s Europe Minister made exactly that point at the weekend, saying:

“The backstop is there because of the red lines that the UK put down”

at the beginning of this process.

We understand that today the Government will back the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady)—the Prime Minister said as much—which will require changes to the backstop, but still we have no clarity on what changes they are or which red lines will change to allow that to happen. On the other side, we see that there is flexibility—an apparent willingness now to renegotiate—but only if the red lines change.

Ms Angela Eagle: Does my right hon. Friend share my puzzlement, after listening to the Prime Minister for close to an hour and with many people having asked the question, that we are still no nearer to knowing any detail on what the phrase “alternative arrangements” means, except that the Prime Minister said they were arrangements that were alternative?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We are witnessing the long, slow decline of this Government as they run down the clock. They put off the vote then lost the vote. They came to the House today and are now offering more votes next week, then a week later and a week later. They are running down the clock, using the fear of no deal as opposed to the Prime Minister’s deal. Her deal was defeated two weeks ago, but the Prime Minister is still to answer the question on which of her red lines she is prepared to change, or even just be flexible on. It is clear that the obstacle to a solution is the Prime Minister. She is refusing to accept the clearly stated will of this House, which has decisively—in record numbers for a parliamentary vote—defeated her deal and which is equally clear in its opposition to a disastrous no deal, which I hope and expect will be reiterated tonight.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am going to make progress.

In the absence of any leadership from the Prime Minister, solutions are being put forward from across the House. Those advocating Norway plus or common market 2.0 have worked on a cross-party basis. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and my hon. Friend the Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and for Manchester Central (Lucy
Powell). They are clear that not only do we need full access to the single market but we need a customs union, too. That is why a new comprehensive and permanent customs union has long been Labour’s policy. It is a pragmatic solution that would help to deliver the Brexit that people voted for and the frictionless trade that the Prime Minister once promised, that would help to deliver a solution to the Irish backstop and that would help to deliver a majority across the House for a deal.

Angela Smith: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Minister for his intervention and his brief statement of his leadership intentions. As I was saying—[Interruption.]

Angela Smith rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I am making progress, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. Is the right hon. Gentleman giving way?

Jeremy Corbyn indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: He is not giving way. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] Order. The House must behave with decorum. Senior Front-Bench Members, who I know would proclaim their commitment to, and I am sure genuinely believe in, courtesy in the Chamber, are witness to deliberate attempts to shout down the Leader of the Opposition. [ Interruption. ] Order. It will not happen. [ Interruption. ] Order. The rules of this House are clear. If the Leader of the Opposition wishes to give way, he does so; if he does not wish to do so, he does not have to do so. He will not be shouted down and no amount of inspired and orchestrated attempts to shout him down will work—not today, not tomorrow, not at any time. Drop it. It is not worth it and, actually, you are not very good at it.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am making progress, Mr Speaker—

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There may be quite a few people in the country watching this debate. They will not understand that our shouting is one way of seeing whether somebody can maintain a line of argument to his and her colleagues here. Given the damage that this debate is already doing to our standing with the nation, might not you consider taking all the amendments that you did not call, and closing the proceedings early so that we can actually vote on those amendments. The country will understand that, whereas they do not understand this behaviour.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I know that he is well-intentioned, but the short answer is no. The timescale for the debate has been set and agreed by the House, and the selection by the Chair has been appropriately made in accordance with the conventions of this House and without demur from colleagues, and it is best that we proceed.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am coming towards the end of my remarks, because I want to ensure that other Members get a chance to speak in this debate.

Simon Hoare: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We will see whether this is a real point of order.

Simon Hoare: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. Earlier in this debate, you rightly referred to the expectations of this place of respect and politeness to colleagues. That is a perfectly sensible benchmark to set. In your judgment, Sir, and I seek your ruling on this, has the behaviour of the Leader of the Opposition to the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) lived up to your expectations of respect to colleagues?

Mr Speaker: The answer is very simple. Good order has been preserved; nothing disorderly has taken place. I do not want to be unkind to the hon. Gentleman because I know that he is trying to be an apprentice parliamentary expert, but I am afraid that he has quite a few steps on the ladder still to climb.

Jeremy Corbyn: The point that I was making is that we could lose 40 to 50 trade agreements that we have through the European Union, which the International Trade Secretary has so far failed to replicate at all, despite the extraordinary and very bold claims that he made at the beginning of this whole Brexit process.

This is a Government in denial, split from top to bottom, and incapable of uniting themselves, let alone the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: No, I am making progress; I will not give way any more.

The Government are in denial about the majority view of this House, which I believe exists to rule out no deal and to get a workable deal that includes a customs union. That is why, tonight, Labour will back amendments that give this House the opportunity to recognise the reality that this Government have so far failed to recognise. This Government’s shambolic handling of Brexit negotiations is fast becoming a crisis. It is worrying to businesses and it is worrying to people in work who are concerned about their futures. Everyone who is worried is worried because they have no leadership on this process from their Government. They have no leadership
from a Government who have demonstrated that they have no ability to negotiate a good deal, no willingness to listen to Parliament—hence we are back here again despite the biggest ever defeat in parliamentary history—and, crucially, no acceptance that they must change course. The Government have spent most of the past two years arguing among themselves rather than negotiating with the European Union. And they are still arguing among themselves and failing to come up with a workable solution. Tonight, I hope that this House does its job and leads where this Government have failed.

3.13 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): None of us taking part in this debate is in any doubt that we are actually discussing an almost unique political crisis—one of a kind that has not happened for very many years. The crisis takes two forms: one is that we are trying to break a political deadlock over exactly what changes we will make to the great bulk of our political, security, intelligence, crime-fighting, trade and investment, and environmental relationships with the rest of the world, having turned away from the ones that we have put together over the past 47 years; the second is that we are also facing a constitutional crisis over the credibility of the Government and Parliament in their ability to resolve these matters. I rather agree with what the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) said. I enjoy as much as any veteran parliamentarian the rowdiness of the House of Commons; it is a way of testing the arguments. However, we should also be aware that, at the moment, the public are looking on our political system with something rather near to contempt, as it seems to them that neither the Government nor the political parties, parliamentarians and politicians in general seem able to resolve a question that was first raised by a referendum. Referendums are designed by those who support them to bypass parliamentary decision making, parliamentary majorities and political parties deciding things. We really do need to settle down, and, perhaps if the Government get their way, we can do that in the next few weeks. We have fewer than 60 days to decide how we will come to conclusions about the way forward.

I want to concentrate on just a few issues. I have put forward most of my views on these amendments in the many debates that we have had already, and many other people want to speak. I suspect that a high proportion of this House can guess which way I will vote on the amendments that Mr Speaker has chosen. Probably far too many of them have had to listen to my arguments. To take some encouragement from this debate—

Frank Field: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: I will in a second.

I wish to take up this question of the relationship between Parliament and the Government, because I took some encouragement from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who did seem to accept that the Government should give opportunities to the House to debate things that each Member regards as key matters of policy. Under our constitution, the Government have to pay regard to the views expressed by this House.

Frank Field: I am very grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. He and I tabled an amendment that was not called. It was to give this House the chance to vote on the various options. The Prime Minister, when she was speaking, talked of taking other amendments away and working on them with the hope of bringing them back to act upon. Might I, through this intervention, ask him to push on his own side that she does precisely that with our amendment?

Mr Clarke: Well, unless I take too long, I hope to touch on the arguments behind the right hon. Gentleman’s excellent amendment, because that is one of the things that we should do in one way or another over the next few weeks.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) rose—

Mr Clarke: Let me just deal with this question and then I will give way to the hon. Gentleman if his point is relevant.

The question is, what is the role of this House vis-à-vis the Government and what are our procedures? I must admit that, in the past month or two, I have listened to what I, as a fairly experienced Member here now, have regarded as the most extraordinary nonsense about sweeping away centuries of tradition and distorting our procedures because people have objected to the Speaker selecting amendments where they think they might not be on the winning side. There is a rather fundamental, underlying problem here. This Government did not start this, but Brexit brought it to its head. I think that it started with the Blair Government, because Tony Blair, with the greatest respect, never could quite understand why he had to submit to Parliament so often. He started timetabling all our business and so on, but that is now water under the bridge. I say with respect that, mistakenly, this Government began by saying that they were going to invoke the royal prerogative, and, as it was a treaty, they felt that Parliament would not be involved in invoking article 50 or any of the consequences because the monarch would act solely on the advice of her Prime Minister, trying to take us back several hundred years. That was swept away. Then we had to have defeats inflicted on the Government last summer in order to get a meaningful vote on the outcome of any negotiations. This has gone on all the way through the process. Today’s debate and the votes that we are having tonight are only taking place because the Government actually resisted the whole idea of coming back here with any alternative to the deal that they were telling us was done and fixed and the only way of going forward. That has worried me all the way through.

Now, I did take the Prime Minister today to be taking a totally different approach, and I hope that she will confirm that. It does now seem that, whatever course we decide on today, things are going to come back to this House. No deal of any kind is going to be ratified until we have had a vote in this House, approving whatever we are presented with. One problem is that we have not yet produced a consensus or a majority for any option, but if this House expresses a clear wish about the nature of the deal that it wants to see negotiated, the Government will consider—indeed, I believe that under our constitution, they are bound to follow—the wishes of the House of
Mr Kenneth Clarke: Commons, because British Governments have never been able to pursue these matters without the consent and support of a majority of the House of Commons.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The right hon. and learned Gentleman said that the House must test the various options. Will he “join the (q)” as it were? Amendment (q) aims to revoke article 50. Is that one of the ideas that he thinks should be tested in this House—even for nothing other than that the people of Scotland would at least know the folly of sticking with Westminster, which is taking them out of Europe against their will?

Mr Clarke: I do not wish to revoke article 50 for the same reasons as the hon. Gentleman, although I do share some of his views. If I was trying to exercise unfettered autocratic power in the government of the country, I would of course still believe that the best interests of the United Kingdom lie in remaining a member of the European Union. I do not share enthusiasm, however, for what the hon. Gentleman wants. After the pleasure of the first referendum and all that it has caused, he now thinks that we will automatically resolve things by having a second referendum, which could be even more chaotic in its effects than that the one we have had.

As I have said, the Government of the day have got to give this House a far bigger role, which therefore means a much bigger responsibility on this House to create the intraparty, cross-party majority that is the only majority of any kind that might be available here for any sensible way forward.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: Let me just finish my point. I will give way in a minute.

I heard all the stuff when the Clerks were invoked—the advice of the Clerks to the Government to resist this approach. Of course it is true that the law can only be changed by legislation. That is a perfectly straightforward legal point. But in our constitution, in my opinion, the Government are accountable politically to the non-legislative votes of Parliament. It is utterly absurd to say that Opposition Supply days and amendments to motions of the kind we are addressing today are just the resolutions of a debating society that have no effect upon the conduct of daily government. If we concede that point in the middle of this shambles of Brexit, with all the other things we have to resolve, we will have done great harm to future generations because it is difficult to see how the concept of parliamentary sovereignty will survive such an extraordinary definition.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I humbly suggest that the Prime Minister is actually following the will of Parliament, because she is remembering that, two years ago, two thirds of MPs in this Parliament voted to trigger article 50, which leads to the unconditional leaving of the European Union on 29 March? That was the instruction that she was given by Parliament that she is trying to deliver, and our duty is to assist her.

Mr Clarke: With the greatest respect to my right hon. Friend, I think that my approach throughout the last two years has demonstrated that I am prepared to be pragmatic in response to these things. I did not regard myself as bound by a referendum. In the British constitution, referendums are advisory—they are described as such in official pronouncements—but politically most Members of this House bound themselves to obeying the result. That was brought home to me in a parliamentary way, consistent with what I have just been saying, by the massive majority of votes cast for invoking article 50. I opposed the invocation of article 50, but since that time I accept—I have to accept—that this House has willed that we are leaving the European Union.

With respect to my right hon. Friend, I do not concur that we agreed to leave unconditionally, whatever the circumstances, at a then arbitrary date two years ahead. We then wasted at least the first 18 months of the time, because nobody here had really thought through in any detailed way exactly what we were now going to seek as an alternative to our membership of the European Union, to safeguard our political and economic relationships with the world in the future. And we still have not decided that. It looks as though I am going to be remarkably brief by my own standards, but that is probably only by contrast with the frequently interrupted Front-Bench speeches, to which I have mercifully been spared.

I realise that the Prime Minister has been driven to this by the attitudes of quite a number of Government Members, but I personally cannot see what the vague alternative to a perfectly harmless backstop that we are now going to explore is; nor do I see what the outcome is going to be. Our partners—or previous partners—in the European Union cannot understand quite what we are arguing for either, so we move from having a deal to not having a deal.

Let me just say what I will vote for. I am not going to go through it amendment by amendment, because Members are waiting to move those amendments. I shall vote for anything that avoids leaving with no deal on 29 March. It is perfectly obvious that we are in a state of such
chaos that we are not remotely going to answer these questions in the 60-odd—fewer than 60—days before then. We need more time. The Prime Minister says that there are only two alternatives: no deal or the deal we have got, which she is now wanting to alter and go back and reopen; or no deal on 29 March. That is not true. A further option—and my guess is that the other members of the European Union would be only too ready to hear it opened up as a possibility—is that we extend article 50 to give us time to actually reach some consensus. I think that it would create quite some time, and there are problems over the European Parliament and so on. I have always said that we can revoke it, while making it clear to the angry majority in the House of Commons that they can invoke it again, with their majorities, once we are in a position to settle these outstanding issues, which, as we sit here at the moment, we are nowhere near to resolving, and we are right at the end of the timetable. The alternative to no deal is to stay in the Union for as long as it takes to get near to a deal that we are likely all to be able to agree on and that the majority of us think is in the national interest.

**Sir Oliver Letwin** (West Dorset) (Con): I think that my right hon. and learned Friend will therefore be joining me in the Lobby in support of what is known as the Cooper amendment. Does he agree that in changing Standing Orders, the House of Commons, if it has a majority to do so, is doing something that the House of Commons has done since Standing Orders were created, and did before the Government took control of the Order Paper in 1906?

**Mr Clarke:** Absolutely. We will not debate the constitutional history, but people are trying to invoke the strictest interpretation of Standing Orders going back to attempts in the late 19th century to stop the Irish nationalists filibustering, which brought the whole thing grinding to a halt. Now we are saying that this Parliament has the temerity to have a range of views, some of which are not acceptable to the Government, Standing Orders should be invoked against us to discipline us. Anyway, I will not go back to that, but I agree with my right hon. Friend.

The other thing that I shall vote for is another thing that supports the Prime Minister’s stated ambition for the long-term future of the country: open borders and free trade between ourselves and our markets in the EU, as demanded by our business leaders, our trade union leaders, and, I think, most people who have the economic wellbeing of future generations at heart. I think the only known way in the world in which we can do that is to stay in a customs union, and also to have sufficient regulatory alignment to eliminate the need for border barriers. I do not mind if some of my right hon. and hon. Friends prefer to call the customs union a “customs arrangement” or if they care to call the single market “regulatory alignment”. I do not feel any great distress at their use of gentler language to describe these things. Nevertheless, something very near to that is required to deliver our economic and political ambitions.

It is also the obvious and only way to protect the permanent open border in Ireland. We do not need to invent this ridiculous Irish backstop if the whole United Kingdom is going into a situation where it has an open border with the whole European Union in any event. The Irish backstop was only invented to appease those people who envisaged the rest of the British Isles suddenly deciding to leave with no deal before we had finished the negotiations in Europe. Well, let us forget that. Let us make it our aim—it will not be easy but it is perfectly possible—to negotiate, probably successfully, with the other 27 an open trading economic and investment relationship through the single market and the customs union.

**Lady Hermon:** I am very grateful to the Father of the House for allowing me to intervene. I just want to say ever so gently that in his very nice tribute to the hon. Member for North Down, I think he might have accidentally referred to the lady as an Irish Member of this House. No, I am very much a British Member of this House. However, he is absolutely right that I feel passionate about protecting the Belfast agreement—the Good Friday agreement—and the peace that it has delivered in the past 20 years across Northern Ireland and across the whole United Kingdom. The backstop was there to protect that peace, and I am very sorry that the Prime Minister has moved away from that today.

**Mr Clarke:** I apologise to the hon. Lady, but I must explain to her that I refer to her and her colleagues as Irish Members of Parliament in the same way that I would refer to myself as an English Member of Parliament, or perhaps to a colleague as a Welsh or Scottish Member of Parliament. [HON. MEMBERS: “Northern Irish.”] She is Northern Irish. I can assure her that not only do I agree entirely with the views she just expressed about what we are seeking here, but I am as keen a Unionist as she is, and I do not wish to see the break-up of the present United Kingdom. I think that she and I are in total agreement.

The other thing I would support, which arises in the context of one of the amendments we are talking about, is that the Government obviously should no longer resist this House having indicative votes. It is absurd that we have been trying to get a debate and a vote on some of the more obvious things for months now, and as time goes on, the Government are still trying to make it difficult to have a vote on them. When we have the votes, no doubt the Government and the Opposition will start imposing three-line Whips on everybody to take a narrow focus, trying to take us all back towards the failed withdrawal agreement or the rather confused, Labour party policy and ensuring that we shoot down every other sensible proposition. There are quite a lot of sensible propositions flying around the House that are superior to the policy of the Government so far and certainly superior to the policy of the Leader of the Opposition. Indicative votes enable us in the time available—to shorten delay further—to give an expression of will and an instruction to the Government about the nature of the long-term arrangements that we want.

To go back to where I started, the circumstances at the moment mean that we have to strive to restore confidence in our political system, our political institutions and, above all, this House of Commons and ensure that an outcome of that kind emerges, because if this shambles goes on much longer, I hate to think where populism and extremism will take us next in British democracy.

3.36 pm

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): As always, it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). I look
forward to spending a considerable time with him in the Lobby this evening as we vote for amendments that offer hope to the people of all these islands.

I want to impress upon the Prime Minister the decision of the people of Scotland in the 2016 referendum and what she must now do to respect their wishes. During the Scottish independence referendum campaign in 2014, the Scottish Tory leader Ruth Davidson promised that voting no meant that Scotland would remain in the EU. Scotland did not vote for a Tory Brexit, but we are being dragged out of the European Union by Westminster against our will. The Prime Minister talks about this being a family of nations and says that Scotland’s voice will be respected. Where is the respect for the views and wishes of the people of Scotland, who have demonstrably said that they wish to remain EU citizens?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Is it not the reality that polling in Scotland shows that the European Union remains more popular with the Scottish people than the United Kingdom? That should be heard loud and clear in this place—the European Union is more popular with Scots than the United Kingdom.

Ian Blackford: That is correct, and it is little surprise, because the European institutions show respect to the people of Scotland, which this Government do not.

The Prime Minister promised that a no vote would see Scotland’s future as an equal partner, but we now see Westminster taking powers off the Scottish Parliament against the wishes of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish people. [Interruption.] I should not do this, but I will. I hear from a sedentary position the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) saying, “What powers?” Obviously, he has forgotten that he voted for the withdrawal Act, which interfered with the powers of the Scottish Parliament laid down in the Scotland Act—powers over fishing, powers over the environment and powers over agriculture. The Tories sat back and allowed the Scottish Parliament to be emasculated. The 13 Scottish Tories acted against the interests of the people of Scotland, as they have done time and again.

The Westminster campaign against Scottish independence said that high street banks were making plans to leave Scotland, yet now, because of this Government’s Brexit, Standard Life Aberdeen is setting up a hub in Dublin, and Lloyds Bank is looking at a Berlin base. Even last week during Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister tried to tell me to drop the SNP policy of independence, yet in June 2017 the leader of the Scottish Tories, Ruth Davidson, said:

“Let me be clear: nobody, not me, not anyone, is expecting the SNP to give up on independence. That’s what it believes in & it’s a perfectly honourable position to take.”

It is a perfectly honourable position to take.

Let me be very clear: Scotland must no longer be left at the mercy of events. Whatever happens here, the SNP will not be dropping its policy of independence. Whatever turmoil and hardship this Tory Government try to drag our nation through, Scotland will and must have the right to determine its own future and to choose to be an independent nation within the European Union. I can see Members shaking their heads. They are shaking their heads because they are running scared. Like the Prime Minister, they fear they would lose an independence referendum. The Scottish people are sick and tired of being told what the Prime Minister wants them to do.

Scotland’s needs are much more important than what the Prime Minister wants. Scotland needs the power to take its own decisions. That is the only way we can stop the Tories driving us off the cliff edge and into disaster.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman made the point that the Scottish people should have what the Scottish people want. Did the Scottish people not indicate their wish to remain part of the United Kingdom?

Ian Blackford: I can only assume that the hon. Lady was not listening to what I said, because the fundamental fact is that we were promised that we would stay in the European Union.

What the Tories find very difficult to accept is that when the Scottish National party went to the people of Scotland, we asked in our manifesto for the right to go back to the people of Scotland if there was a material change of circumstances, and that is exactly the position we are in today. There is a majority in the Scottish Parliament for a referendum on Scottish independence, yet what we hear from the Conservatives is, “Now is not the time,” disrespecting the mandate that the people of Scotland gave to their elected parliamentarians. I will say this to Conservative Members: if our First Minister calls for a section 30 authority, based on democracy, then this House must respect the will of the Scottish people through their elected parliamentarians.

That is the only way to stop the punitive cuts from universal credit and amend the hostile environment that sends talented workers away from our shores. The vote on the immigration Bill is just the latest indication of Westminster voting against Scotland’s national interest. We embrace free movement of people. We welcome those who choose to make a future for themselves in Scotland. We thank those who wish to add to our cultural diversity. This place wants to slam the door shut, pull up the drawbridge and retreat into isolation.

We watch the official Opposition go through trials and tribulations about whether they should oppose a narrow-minded immigration policy from this Government. Labour has lost its moral compass. Then we have the Scots Tory MPs meekly going through the Lobbies. Theresa’s Lobby fodder are supporting legislation that will damage Scottish industries and our public services, and damage Scotland’s ability to attract labour and to grow our economy. The Scottish Tories are acting against our national interest, and Labour is stuck on the sidelines.

A majority of MSPs and Scottish MPs returned at the last two elections support holding an independence referendum in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Scotland will not be ignored. The UK Government have ignored the views of the people of Scotland. Our Parliament—our Scottish Parliament—has already overwhelmingly rejected the Prime Minister’s deal. Today, SNP MPs will vote in support of that mandate from Scotland’s Parliament, and we will continue to vote down the blindfold Brexit deal that will drive our economy off the cliff edge.

There are just 59 days to go until Brexit day, and the deal on the table is done; it has been dead in the water for months, yet the Prime Minister is still seeking to run
down the clock and push that deal through this House. That is incredibly reckless and risky. How can she be allowed to behave in such a manner? She has no hope of convincing this House; she cannot even control her disunited party. If anyone is still in any doubt about it, we are in this mess today because Conservative Members gambled our economic future over a decade-long internal feud in the Tory party. They should all hang their heads in shame. Quite simply, that party is not fit to govern, because it has a track record of putting its fractured party interests before the national interest—not what the Prime Minister calls the national interest, but the interest of all the nations that make up the UK.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): On the Scottish national interest, I totally respect the Scottish National party’s position: it has always campaigned for independence, because that is what the SNP does. However, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that in the 2017 general election, the majority—56%—of voters in Scotland voted for parties that were committed to delivering on Brexit? The percentage of the vote for parties against Brexit actually reduced. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. That is extraordinary behaviour from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is an illustrious doctor. She is ranting from a sedentary position; I cannot believe that she rants in that way in the middle of her surgeries. It is unbecoming of somebody of her status and high esteem in the House of Commons.

Ian Blackford: Of course, we come to this place under the rules that have been laid down, and under the rules of elections in this country; the SNP won 35 of 59 Scottish seats at Westminster. That is a majority for the Scottish National party in this Parliament. The Conservatives can only dream of having a majority. The Prime Minister went to the country on the basis that she would come back with an overwhelming majority; she came back with a bloody nose and a minority Administration who rely on the votes of the Democratic Unionist party, having handed over vast sums of money to keep themselves in any kind of power.

Today, as the Prime Minister faces a vote on her motion, the threat of resignations overshadows the debate. We know that senior Ministers have refused to rule out resigning if no deal is not taken off the table. Politicians play a slow game, and time is running out for businesses. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) said that the Prime Minister’s attempt to put pressure on moderate MPs to back her deal to avoid a disorderly Brexit was “a disaster for business”.

The chief executive of Airbus, Tom Enders, said the business “could be forced to redirect future investments” in the event of no deal. The chief executive of Siemens, Jürgen Maier, said:

“The thing all of us won’t be able to manage is a no-deal” and now the British Retail Consortium warns of food shortages and empty shelves.

Just dwell on this: Sainsbury’s, Asda, Marks and Spencer, the Co-op, Waitrose and Costcutter all warn of not having sufficient supplies and of shelves lying empty. We are used to seeing images of empty shelves in war-torn or failing states, but there is a real threat of empty shelves in the United Kingdom in less than two months. Still the Prime Minister refuses to take no deal off the table. I point the finger of blame at the Prime Minister and her Government. The primary responsibility of any Government is to protect their citizens. We have a massive failure of leadership. If there are shortages of food and medicine, that will be a response to the failures of this Government. There is genuine, heartfelt fear and alarm from some of our biggest businesses.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): What is the right hon. Gentleman’s objection to enabling the Prime Minister to probe the EU on what it is prepared to give way on, to help to deliver the deal that he would like? What is so objectionable in new amendment (n)? Can he give any reason for not supporting it?

Ian Blackford: This is a complete fantasy. All of us play with the Good Friday agreement at our peril. The peace in Ireland has been hard won. The European Union has reached agreement with the UK on the Prime Minister’s draft deal on the basis of making sure that we enshrine the Good Friday agreement. None of us should be playing with fire and seeking to unwind the Good Friday agreement. That is the effect of what would happen. It is the height of irresponsibility to go down that road. [Interruption.] I am going to come on to the backstop in more detail later.

The Prime Minister could make it clear today that she will bring measures before Parliament to rule out no deal. Prime Minister, it is in all our national interests to remove the threat of supply shortages that is a threat to food safety—remove it today.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Is it not also a fact that in addition to the companies who issued those warnings, the Road Haulage Association has been saying for over a year that it is madness to consider a no-deal situation? What will happen is that those people at the furthest reaches of the supply chain—and my right hon. Friend’s constituents—will be those worst affected by the no-deal scenario that the Government are hanging over the heads of this Parliament and the people of all the nations of the UK.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is quite correct. We have integrated supply chains on the basis of the single market, which has been in place since the 1990s. There are very real threats to food supply on the basis of no deal. It is the height of irresponsibility for the Government not to rule it out.

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, because he is making a really powerful case about what no deal could really look like. He says there could be food shortages and, crucially, that food prices could go up. Does he share my anger at the voices behind me that he perhaps did not hear? When he was talking about food prices going up and the fact that there could be food shortages, Members behind me were saying, “Well, let them go to the chippy instead.” Does he share my anger about the way in which our constituencies would be affected by no deal?
Ian Blackford: I am sorry to hear that that remark was made. This is a really important debate. There is a responsibility on each and every one of us to take these issues seriously. [Interruption.] I want to make some progress and I will take some interventions later.

The Prime Minister will do nothing. She remains in office but not in power. transfixes like a rabbit caught in the headlights. There is a failure to deliver leadership.

To use a food analogy, the Prime Minister is past her sell-by date. Focusing on backing MPs into a corner with the only options on the table her deal or no deal is ridiculous. I urge Members to resist the pressure. We cannot allow the UK Government to run down the clock and bully MPs into backing this terrible deal.

Pretending there is a binary choice between her woeful deal and a catastrophic no deal is completely reckless. It is false. It is not the case and Members must have the courage to stand up against it. We have the power in this place to send this shambolic deal packing. We have the power to amend the deal to protect all our citizens. We have the power to end this charade. Members on all Benches: have courage, have conviction and have some integrity. Do not send our economy off the cliff edge with this deal or with no deal.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has made some very powerful points, quoting the voices of business saying that there should not be no deal. I also believe there should not be no deal; I believe there should be a deal. Does he also accept that those same voices of business, giving evidence to Select Committees, have said, for the very reasons he is giving, that there should not be no deal and that we should support the Prime Minister’s deal with the European Union because it provides for an orderly and smooth Brexit?

Ian Blackford: The businesses I speak to recognise the benefits of the single market and the customs union. There is no Brexit option that will leave us better off than the status quo. I will come on to the economic arguments about that. Our job is to protect the economic interests of our citizens, but Brexit will lead to job losses throughout the United Kingdom. We have already seen the news about the European Medicines Agency and the European Banking Authority—they have gone—and the news about the European Medicines Agency and the European Banking Authority—both are bringing forward.

We have still not seen any economic assessment of the Government’s deal. Either the Prime Minister has not instructed her Government to conduct one, or they will not publish it due to the reality of the hardship that her deal will bring. We are being asked again to vote for a blindfold Brexit and to sleepwalk into the future without facts and analysis from the Government about what the deal means for our economy. It is an insult to this House and each and every Member in it.

I wish to ask the Prime Minister a question—I hope she reads this in Hansard, as she is not here. Will she publish the details of the impact of her deal on the economy and contrast it with the status quo? The Government are refusing to end the shroud of secrecy and publish an economic analysis, but let me remind the House of the facts. Analysis by Scottish Government officials found that by 2030, under a free trade agreement, GDP would be £9 billion lower than it would have been if we had stayed in the EU—equivalent to £1,600 per person in Scotland. The Bank of England has warned that crashing out of the EU without a deal would be worse than the 2008 financial crisis, with house prices plummeting by as much as 30% and the Bank of England rate being hiked to 4%. Brexit uncertainty is already damaging our economy to the tune of £600 per household per year. Jobs and investment are at risk, and our economy is set to be weaker and smaller. How can any Member of this House countenance that?

We were elected to protect our citizens, not punish them, but Brexit will inflict undue pain across all parts of the United Kingdom. With this deal or no deal our constituencies are set to suffer, and we cannot allow that to happen. Some Brexiteers argue that we will be okay without the internal markets of the EU. They are in cloud cuckoo land, harking back to the past. I say this to them: it is over.

Let us look at the facts. The UK’s trade with County Cork is worth almost as much as its entire trade with South Africa. Trade with Ireland is worth more to the UK than trade with India, Japan, New Zealand and Australia put together. As “Scotland’s Place in Europe” demonstrated, even if the UK signs agreements with the 10 biggest non-EEA single country trading partners, including the USA, China and Canada—a process that would take many years—that would cover only 37% of
Scotland’s current exports. By contrast, 43% currently go to the European Union. The idea that we will be better off outside the European Union is a fallacy.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): If trade volumes are the principal determinant of policy in this area, would the right hon. Gentleman not agree that, given that 61% of Scotland’s exports go to the rest of the UK and only 17% to the EU, the most important Union for Scotland is the United Kingdom?

Ian Blackford: I find that remarkable. There we have a threat to the people of Scotland from a Conservative Member. I thought we believed in free trade. We are not talking about barriers to trade with the island of Ireland, so why on earth would there be barriers to trade with Scotland? It is about time the Conservatives stopped threatening the people of Scotland, because that is exactly what they are doing.

It is demoralising to sit here today listening to the merry-go-round of Tory infighting and Labour fence-sitting. There is no leadership from these two parties. I genuinely feel for those across the UK who voted for the Tories and Labour and have been so badly let down. Now their cowardice threatens us all: our livelihoods, yes, but also our culture and communities and the type of society we could be. Our cultural ties with Europe run deep throughout Scotland. The auld alliance is perhaps the best known of Scotland’s ancient ties. France and Scotland enjoy deep cultural ties and have agreed a mutual cultural statement of intent, which the Scottish Government signed in 2013. We share a rich Celtic history of story-telling and traditional music and a great love of piping.

Such was the wealth of intellectual exchange between Scotland and Europe that in Kirkwall’s library in the 1680s there were books from Amsterdam, Kraków, Brussels, Rostock, Paris, Leipzig and dozens of other places. Our relationship with Germany dates back to 1297, when William Wallace wrote to the martyrs of Lübeck and Hamburg declaring Scotland open for business. In case Members are unaware, immigration was around 12% in tailoring, while most of the Italian migrants became more involved with restaurants and retail.

We have so much to lose from Brexit and nothing to gain. I plead with Members to change course. If they do, history will remember their act of courage. Today, Members have an opportunity to preserve our opportunities with Europe—our cultural links, our shared values, our economic ties and our solidarity in coming together to find a way forward.

Voting for the SNP amendment will respect the votes of the people of Scotland in 2016. They must not and will not be dragged out of the EU against their will. Scotland’s voice has been ignored for too long. The SNP will continue to press for the best possible outcome for the people of Scotland, and if our voice is not respected—if Scotland is continuously silenced and sidelined by this Tory Government—this place will not be forgiven.

The days of Westminster having a veto over Scotland’s future are over. Only as an independent country can Scotland thrive; and friends, we will thrive. The discussions today about ditching the backstop are just internal Tory matters. They can fight and squabble, but the EU is united and clear. It will not accept any changes to the backstop in the withdrawal agreement.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: One of the things that I think the Prime Minister did not quite convey or understand, or forgot, is that the backstop is a compromise. It is a compromise based on the fantasies of the technologies that she has promised will come. If she is right and those fantasies are true, she does not need to worry about the backstop. She would not need to worry if the technology that is being used on the Swiss border were available. I suggest that the Europeans have used a backstop because they know that the fantasies are exactly that.

Ian Blackford rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am cautiously optimistic that the right hon. Gentleman is approaching his brief peroration. [Interruption.]

Ian Blackford: If Members want to hear more, I am happy to carry on.

My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I would say to the Prime Minister that there are two ways in which we could fix the backstop. The first is staying in the European Union, but the second is staying in the single market and the customs union. That is the fundamental point: that is the only way in which it is possible to remove any need for the backstop from the agreement. The Taoiseach is clear about the fact that the backstop is not up for grabs, so why do Members not get real? Why does the Prime Minister not stop fudging it?

The Prime Minister needs to own up to her own delayed mess, extend article 50, and do it today. That is the only way in which to give this place time to find a solution.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. With immediate effect, a 10-minute limit will now apply to Back-Bench speeches, but I do not anticipate that it will last very long.

4.6 pm

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I will accept your guidance, Mr Speaker.
It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for plenty of reasons, but specifically because he happens to have what I think is possibly the most beautiful constituency in the country—and my heart is there because both my parents are buried there, as are many of my ancestors. There are some links between us, beyond a wee drop now and then.

In the limited time available to me, I want to respond to what was said by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. She gave us a challenge—quite rightly, I think—at the beginning of what was, I must say, an excellent speech. She said that we had spent a lot of time telling everyone what we were against and that now we must say what we were in favour of. In accepting that challenge, I shall say what I am against, and then come on to what I am in favour of. I shall do that quickly, I hope.

I shall oppose the amendment tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). He remains a friend, an honourable friend, and he is much admired: he was, I thought, an excellent Attorney General. However, I disagree with him on this specific issue. I do not think—this is my view, and we will have different feelings about it—that the House needs another process, or mechanism, to allow it to decide what it is in favour of or against. I think that all multiple motions of this kind end up with a place like this going nine ways from Sunday, and we do not end up with any kind of agreement. I think that the amendment process is a way of deciding what we are in favour of. My right hon. and learned Friend will push his amendment tonight, and I think we will then get an idea of whether the House really does think that.

Let me comment in the same light, but for a different reason, on the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) proposing a delay. Like my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, I do not think that, of all the things we need right now, we need to book a delay regardless of what we are actually delaying for. I am conscious of the way in which the Commission has responded to the idea of a delay in recent days. Its response has been, “We do not want you to delay, because we do not want you to crash into all our procedures that we have now allowed. For instance, you are not taking part in the European elections—we do not want those to be disrupted—and we do not know what it is that you want to delay for.”

The amendment contains no appendage, as it were, telling us what the delay might actually be about. I can understand someone saying, “We are near the end of an agreement, but we have run out of time a bit,” but that is different from simply crying out for a delay. I think that, ultimately, it comes down to the fact that, as many on the right hon. Lady’s own side have said, it will then become a reality that we are opposing the delivery of Brexit. Those who vote for the amendment tonight will have to face that challenge: perhaps the delay is really all about stopping Brexit. However, I will leave the right hon. Lady to deal with that herself. I admire her enormously, as I would, but on this issue, I disagree with her completely.

As for the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), again, I just do not think that this one works. The issue of a delay—even expressed as it is in the terms of a motion—brings me back to where I was earlier. I hope that my right hon. Friend will forgive me, but I will not support her tonight. I shall go with the Prime Minister on this.

I want to make two further points and then a comment about what I think I must support tonight. I voted against the agreement; I did so because I felt it was too full of problems and issues that would not be settled and would give a lack of clarity, and so I expressed my view. I have not voted against the Government for well over 20 years, and I did not particularly enjoy doing it, but I did so because I felt that we needed to rethink this and go back and make some changes. So I am pleased tonight that the Prime Minister has come back.

I challenge those who say that the only thing available is the backstop as it is. That is not altogether true; it depends what question is being asked. An open border, which is the key question that Ireland wanted, can be settled by a much simpler backstop. I am in favour of a backstop; I think it is fair for Ireland and Northern Ireland to want guarantees that there will be an open border, so I am in favour of an open border and of that guarantee. I am just not in favour of the complexity and nature of the demands that left Northern Ireland separated in terms from this Union that we are in favour of keeping Northern Ireland in. That led to serious and significant problems. I believe that the protocol that we have, and that I have been to see the negotiating team in Brussels over, is the key to the way we go forward, and I believe its response to us was positive. I therefore think it would be good to take that process back to Brussels.

This brings me to what has emerged overnight, which I have been involved with myself, although not absolutely in the frontline. It is an agreement between those of us who take different views about Brexit in my party. I am thinking in particular of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). I say absolutely genuinely to my colleagues that we might be divided about these issues, but we must now strive to find some kind of compromise. I say that as if it is somehow a discovery, but it is not really; I do genuinely think we have the prospect of moving towards that. So however we vote tonight, I hope we will, bit by bit, get behind the process that my colleagues have put forward with those of other colleagues who have taken a very different view about Brexit. I think this is wholly feasible, and I am in full support of this, given the nature of it. I therefore recommend that all of us, despite how we end up voting tonight, recognise that in delivering leaving the European Union in line with the vote that took place in the referendum, this offers a real opportunity not just for Members on my side of the House but for Members opposite who believe that it is right to deliver Brexit to get behind it.

So now I come to what I am in favour of, which started with the issue of this internal agreement here. We need what the Prime Minister described today: we need to express that view. The Prime Minister was clear on a number of points that I particularly wanted to hear. I wanted to hear whether she was determined to ensure that, where necessary, we looked for legally binding change and that change therefore would change the complexion of the agreement that she had, and she said that today. I also thought she was very clear to the
whole House that she is not going to assume that, were a particular amendment to be passed, it would mean we would all agree with whatever she came back with, and she has absolutely guaranteed that we will return with a chance to vote on that; I think that is clear.

I am also pleased that the Prime Minister answered my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) on the question about the extent of the legal powers and the adjudication of the Court of Justice in the Bill to follow; I thought it was strong of her to do that. Many would have avoided that question, as it is complex. Most of my hon. Friend’s questions are quite complex, but she dealt with this one and dealt with it well.

Trying to keep to the time limit for speeches, I shall now simply say that on that basis, having voted against the amendment, I am now going to support the amendment of my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). I shall support it tonight, not because I give a blank cheque and not because I think that therefore we will have solved the problem; I give this support to him, and therefore to what the Prime Minister has said is the Government’s position, because I believe it is necessary for us now to send the Prime Minister back with a fair wind and a sense that this House has agreed that it wants her to go and renegotiate, and to take that change and that desire to deliver Brexit on time on 29 March with her over there to Brussels and achieve what I hope and believe, with strength and determination, she will be able to achieve in those negotiations. I wish her well, and I therefore will be voting tonight to support that amendment because I think it will be, for me, the greatest expression of my good will for a Prime Minister for whom, notwithstanding our disagreements sometimes, I have the greatest respect.

4.15 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I rise to speak to amendment (b) and to support amendments (a), (g), (i) and (j). I also support amendment (h), but it has not been selected.

There are two months to go until the end of the time limit. The Prime Minister’s deal was rejected comprehensively, fundamentally because I think all sides shared the view that it would weaken us abroad and in the negotiations ahead. It represents a blindfold Brexit that would weaken our negotiating hand. The Prime Minister is not instilling confidence that she has the ability to sort this out. I am really worried that the delay, the drift and the chasing of unicorns mean that we will reach the cliff edge and that the clock is ticking. I am very worried by the Prime Minister’s failure to sort this out. I am really worried that the delay, the drift and the chasing of unicorns mean that we will not be able to sort this out. I am really worried that the delay, the drift and the chasing of unicorns mean that we will not be able to sort this out.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend share my dismay at how Government Members have reacted to industry’s concerns?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. We should be able to have a calm and measured debate, not all this shouting.

There have been different ways to do this at every stage. Two years ago, the whole House came together when both remain and leave voters voted to trigger article 50. I voted to do so and called at the time for a cross-party commission to oversee the options and negotiations. I called repeatedly on the Prime Minister to consult and to build consent. I went to see Ministers about it, and I went to see them again a few weeks ago to see if progress could be made and to urge them to reconsider the red lines. I made customs union-related proposals to Select Committees and, through the Select Committee on Home Affairs, suggested reforms to security co-operation and immigration as part of the Brexit process. Many of us have called repeatedly on the Government to simply pin down what they think the future of our country and of our relationship will be, instead of this blindfold Brexit in which nothing is resolved.

We have also called on the Government to build consensus. As I said after the general election, if we want a sustainable deal that does not unravel in a year or two and does not end up being undermined because there is so much disagreement, not just in this House but across the country, efforts must be made to build consensus on a deal. None of that has happened, and none of it is happening now either. Instead, we feel more divided and our country feels angrier and more confused than ever. People are sick of all the chaos, and the problem we face is that if we end up with no deal in just two months’ time, that chaos and that division will get worse.

The Prime Minister’s repeated delays mean that there is a real risk that the issue will not be resolved on time. There were 24 months to negotiate under article 50: five of them were used for a general election and another 16 were run down before the Government even came forward with the Chequers plan. It was left until 22 months had gone before we even had a vote in Parliament on the Prime Minister’s deal. There was no consultation on her red lines and Parliament was not given a vote on the mandate.

Those delays and failings are why we are here now. Unless the Prime Minister changes direction and her approach, I fear we will reach the brink. Saying the same things again and again will simply make it more important to have in place my amendment and my Bill, to ensure there is a safety net to prevent no deal on 29 March. I have always believed that the Prime Minister would not let that happen and that she would flinch when it came to the crunch; that she is not the sort of person who would want to make other people suffer because of her delays and mistakes. However, when I look into her eyes now, I am worried that that has changed because she is trapped.

Every time the Prime Minister has had the chance to pull back and reach out, she has done the opposite. Every time she has had the chance to think about the country, she has instead turned to the party. Every time she has had the chance to build bridges, she has instead
turned to the hardliners who simply want to set those bridges on fire. That is why I and a group of other, cross-party MPs and Committee Chairs have put forward amendment (b) and this Bill—to try to get the Prime Minister to think again and to make sure that Parliament has a safety net.

The amendment makes time to pass a Bill. It would give the Prime Minister and the Government until the end of February to sort things out. If they have not done so by then, MPs would get a binding vote at the end of February on whether to seek a bit more time and to extend article 50. We should bear it in mind that that would be just one month before the UK could crash out with no deal at all.

Neither the amendment nor the Bill blocks Brexit or revokes article 50—nor should they. They simply give Parliament the right to vote on whether to extend article 50 if time has run out.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I have looked at the right hon. Lady’s Bill in great detail. Will she confirm that clause 1(5) leaves open the prospect of an amendment being passed that would mean that article 50 could be revoked, not just extended?

Yvette Cooper: That is certainly not my intention with the Bill. It is about giving the House the opportunity to extend article 50 if we need more time, and to be able to decide the length of the extension. The whole point is that the motion put to the House would be amendable and those amendments would be binding.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. She talks of building consensus. I see consensus on both sides of the House for an extension of three months. If that were the will of the House, would it be possible for us to have an extension of three months only?

Yvette Cooper: It absolutely would be possible for the House to restrict any extension to three months. In fact, it would be possible to restrict it to three days, should Parliament choose to do so. We are not proposing that a specific time period should be decided now. The whole point is that it should be a decision at the end of February. My hon. Friend is right that that is what Parliament would be able to do.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree with me, and would she confirm to the House again, that this is not about extending article 50, but about allowing Parliament to make the decision in the event that there is no deal and that the next step facing us is crashing out with no deal?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We would be taking no decisions today, and we would be taking no decisions next Tuesday, when we would discuss the Bill. Instead, we would simply be saying that, at the end of February, with just one month to go before we get to the end of the article 50 process, it would be for Parliament to decide whether to seek an extension, and how long that should be for.
Their job is to reassure, and they work and they cope with whatever situation people throw at them, and when they are warning of the risks of no deal, we should be supporting them and not making it harder for them to do their crucial job of keeping us safe.

I know how hard this debate is for many on both sides of the House. Accusations, false claims, fake news and abuse are being thrown about, and I know how hard it seems to have become to have a calm, common-sense debate without words being lifted or twisted. I know, too, how many people want somebody else to take responsibility, and I fear that that is what the Prime Minister and Ministers want, but we cannot be cowardly about it.

The Prime Minister is running out of time. Too few dare say it, but everyone knows it. Before it is too late, we have to be honest. I urge people to support amendment (b) to give the House a chance to discuss the Bill, because if we cannot be honest at such an historic time, I do not know what politics is for.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. An eight-minute limit applies with immediate effect.

4.27 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I cannot deny that I have found the process of Brexit one of the most wearisome and unpleasant periods of my time in this House, but the cloud has a little bit of a silver lining. I find this afternoon that an amendment I first proposed last summer, which was vehemently denounced by some of my right hon. and hon. Friends as being about to break the party apart, and that I brought back just before Christmas, and passed with the help of many right hon. and hon. Members, now appears to have something to commend it to the very people who denounced it then. I note with pleasure that amendment (n) appears to command some support among Conservative Members, and from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, but it could not even have been brought up for consideration if the system that had been devised for this House, simply to have motions in neutral terms be unamendable, had been followed. I derive some slight satisfaction from that.

I now tempt the House to accept another amendment, amendment (g), and I will briefly explain why. We are mired in complete paralysis. The deal that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister brought back, which I suspect is probably the best deal available, does not commend itself to many of my right hon. and hon. Friends. If they voted to leave, it does not meet their dreams at all. What about somebody like myself? When I look at the deal objectively, from the point of view of an ex-remainer, simply cannot understand how we are going to be better off leaving on such terms than remaining in the European Union.

Sir William Cash: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Grieve: No, I am going to make some progress, if I may.

In those circumstances, we have to find a way forward. Throughout the times that I have tabled amendments for this House to consider, I have tried to avoid objectives and look at process. Frankly, we could do with more days of debate of this sort unless or until we reach agreement. Of course, if we do reach agreement, with this amendment we can have another business of the House motion and we will just drop the remaining sitting days. It is rather sensible to set aside six days between now and the end of March when this House can debate, free of the interference of government, which I have to say I am afraid has sought consistently to restrict debate into an absolute straitjacket of what it wanted to hear and nothing else. If we have those days, it will help us, just as we are actually starting to tease out this afternoon, to make a little bit of progress towards compromise.

Of course my views are well known about the desirability of a further referendum, and I will come back to them right at the end, but I am perfectly aware that many Members in this House do not agree with that, even if they also share my regret at what we are doing in leaving the EU. But that in no way diminishes for me the value of these days, and I agree entirely with the Father of the House and with my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) that the idea that this is some constitutional abomination simply does not bear scrutiny; we are in control of our Standing Orders and changing them in this way to get the debates we need is entirely in keeping with the traditions of this House and the fact that the Government, in this area, simply do not enjoy the majority that some Governments have normally used to suppress it.

Sir William Cash: Somebody who refers to national suicide, as my right hon. and learned Friend did the other day, is now moving towards a proposition that involves constitutional homicide, but let me put it another way. Does he agree that he voted for the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which states unequivocally that the European Communities Act 1972 will be expressly repealed? Therefore, is what he is now saying going to contradict that, because he does not want the 1972 Act to be expressly repealed—yes or no?

Mr Grieve: I say to my hon. Friend that he is familiar enough with the constitutions of this country and this House to know that this House can propose, debate, pass and revoke laws—we do it quite often sometimes, including laws that have never actually been implemented. So this House can do what it thinks is right at any given moment, and that is the flexibility we need. I tabled my amendment in the spirit of trying to reach some sort of understanding where the majority might lie to bring this unhappy episode to a conclusion. I have also made it clear that in doing that one has to keep in mind and respect the decision of the earlier referendum, but that does not mean—I will come back to this in a moment as well—that one simply says that one is going to drag the country out on terms that nobody very much seems to support and towards a future that on the face of it looks pretty bad. To do that would be an abdication of our responsibility.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has also said that this House should say what it wants and what it does not want. May I say to her that knowing what one does not want can be quite a good starting place to understanding where compromise is reached over what one is prepared to accept? There are amendments down this evening on no deal that I shall support, because it is
quite clear to me that this House utterly rejects no deal. Therefore, I will vote for those as well and I ask the House to vote for my amendment, which is neutral in objective but which will give us the opportunity we need to continue developing the debate we have to have if we are to resolve this matter sensibly.

There is then amendment (n), which I have to say is quite tempting in some ways. Our party has deep divisions over Brexit, and we know the pleasure we get when, because of the respect and affection we have for each other, we can all vote together. We did it when we supported my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on the motion of confidence. For that reason, it is very tempting to be told that we should just vote for amendment (n) and send some message that we might just be close to resolving our disagreements with the EU, and doing it collectively. I have some slight anxiety about this, however.

The backstop is indeed a rather humiliating thing, which is why Democratic Unionist party Members do not like it. As a Unionist, I can understand that, to the bottom of my heart, because it highlights the fact that when we leave the EU, the EU is going to continue to have a hold constitutionally over some of the things that we do. But the truth is that the backstop is just the outward sign of a much more profound truth: that ever since we signed up to the Good Friday agreement to resolve, on a permanent basis, an outstanding constitutional issue of identity on the island of Ireland, we have bound ourselves to keep an open border. The unpleasant truth is that that is incompatible with the aim of some right hon. and hon. Friends, who want to take us to a future in which we diverge on tariffs and regulation, and which inevitably therefore leads to a hard border having to be introduced.

I fear that our being asked to support amendment (n) this evening is a piece of displacement activity—something in which I am afraid the House has specialised in the past two and a half years, and which one often sees young children doing when they are asked to face up to something they do not like. That seems to me to be what the amendment is about because, first, it is quite clear that the EU will not negotiate on it—although I do accept that if you do not ask, you do not get—and secondly, even if we were to get the backstop removed, the trouble is that what some of my right hon. and hon. Friends are asking for is inevitably going to bring this conflict into the open once we are gone. If I may gently say so to them, this is one of the issues that we need to debate in those six days that I hope I may have set aside for the House. There is a lack of trust about future intention that makes 29 March completely irrelevant, because the truth is that the disputes about the nature of our state and how we relate to those around us will resume immediately afterwards.

For those reasons, I am afraid I cannot support amendment (n), but I am delighted to have provided—if only by my previous amendment, at least—an opportunity to this House to start having a dialogue. I very much hope we can pursue that.

4.37 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I think we all realise that today’s debate is predominantly about process, but that cannot hide one essential truth: we are facing a crisis; our country is in a state of suspended animation because of that crisis; and the intransigent nature of the debate—partly here today and certainly outside the Chamber—is a consequence of that crisis, because in truth every single one of us present is anxious about what is going to happen to our country.

Following the defeat of the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement and political declaration, she said that she would reach out, and I welcomed that, although it would have been much better had it been done two years ago. We now know that she is not for turning on the political declaration but seeks somehow to change the backstop. I am all for optimism, but I somehow doubt that the EU is for turning on this issue either. Unless the Prime Minister knows something that we do not, I do not see how it is going to be changed.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the fact that Guy Verhofstadt has today said:

“The deal we have is fair and cannot be re-negotiated. The backstop is needed because of UK red lines and was crafted by the UK and the EU to secure the Good Friday Agreement...We remain open to positive changes regarding the future relationship and it is time for a more consensual cross-party approach to deliver this”?

Does not that make it absolutely clear that the Prime Minister’s approach is a charade, and it needs to be stopped now?

Hilary Benn: I fear that my hon. Friend is right, as the Prime Minister will find out. She will have to return to the House, I suspect, and say, “I am sorry, but I could not get the thing to which some Members object removed.” I simply say that if Members do not want Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom to have different rules, and if they want to ensure that, in all circumstances, goods can flow freely without tariffs, delays, paperwork or checks then it is the political declaration that needs to be changed.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): rose—

Hilary Benn: I will give way, but then I want to make progress.

Mr McFadden: In supporting amendment (n), the Prime Minister has driven a coach and horses through the deal that she asked us to endorse a fortnight ago. If my right hon. Friend is right that she cannot secure legal change in the withdrawal agreement, what can she come back with on 13 February?

Hilary Benn: Well, in truth, it is very hard to see what she can come back with if my right hon. Friend is correct in his assessment. It is odd, to put it very gently, that we are spending so much time on the backstop, which is something that the Government signed up to more than a year ago, when we really should be debating the most important issue: the future of our relationship with our European neighbours. The reason why the defeat was so large, certainly in relation to those on the Opposition Benches, is that we are not prepared to sign up to a deal that, far from giving the nation certainty about the future of that relationship, has shrouded it in fog and mist that is entirely of the Government’s
own making. My preferred approach, as Members will probably know, is to be part of the European economic area and a customs union. Other Members have different views, which is why I put down the amendment calling for indicative votes as recommended by the Select Committee. Although the Prime Minister today appeared to be unenthusiastic about indicative votes, she spent most of her speech hooovering up indicative suggestions, mainly from those on her own Benches. I gently say to her that, one day, she may find herself climbing into the “little rubber life-raft”—to quote a former Prime Minister—of indicative votes. Until that central issue is addressed and until the Government are honest with the House about the choices that we have to make, we will continue to remain in our current state—businesses will continue to remain uncertain about their future and, frankly, the public will continue to ask us, “What on earth is going on?” That brings me to the amendments that seek to prevent us from leaving the EU without an agreement in just 59 days’ time.

**Sir Oliver Letwin:** Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if we are to succeed in using indicative votes as a process for getting to resolution, hon. Members on both sides of the House and from all parts of the House will have to be willing to sacrifice their first preference and ask instead the question, “What can I tolerate?”

**Hilary Benn:** I say to the right hon. Gentleman, as I have said to the House before, in the end, if we are to make progress, people will have to compromise. It is a very British tradition, which seems to be somewhat lacking in the process at the moment.

The Select Committee took a lot of evidence and we came to a very, very stark conclusion, and I will quote what we said:

“A ‘managed no deal’ cannot constitute the policy of any responsible Government.”

I do not think that that conclusion will come as a surprise to the Prime Minister. She knows it, most of the Cabinet know it, business knows it and the House knows that the damage that would be inflicted, and the sheer practical difficulties of leaving on 29 March, mean that this is an outcome that cannot possibly be contemplated. I know there are those on the Government Benches who say, “Oh, it’s all exaggerated.” What I do not understand is why it is that they, with great respect, appear to know more about the consequences of no deal than do the businesses that import things, that make things and that export things.

**David T. C. Davies** rose—

**Hilary Benn:** No, I will not give way.

Those businesses do not want tariffs, bureaucracy, delays and checks. The truth is that no one has any idea about what customs officers in Calais will do on the first day and the second day if there is a no-deal Brexit, but, eventually, those officers will have to start checking goods, because we will be a third country. Every lorry that is stopped—

**Charlie Elphicke:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way.

**Hilary Benn:** No, I will not give way.

**Charlie Elphicke:** On that point—

**Hilary Benn:** No.

The lorries will be backed up from Dover, and a lorry stuck on the M20 cannot be in Germany to pick up the car parts that car plants in Britain require in order to function.

When we add in what my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said about security in her powerful speech, as well as the uncertainty for citizens here and abroad—maybe some British citizens will feel that they must return to the United Kingdom because of that uncertainty—then we realise why this is a prospect that cannot be contemplated. I would not want to be the Government who had to explain to the British people why these things were happening, when the Government were responsible in the first place.

Although many of us may still cling to the hope that the Prime Minister will not take us out of the EU with no deal, I am not absolutely sure. That is why I will vote enthusiastically for amendment (b) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford and amendment (g) in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve).

**Charlie Elphicke:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** I hope that this is a point of order, not a point of frustration or irritation, which would be an abuse of the procedures of the House.

**Charlie Elphicke:** I do not wish the House to be inadvertently misled. The proportion of lorries that are checked is 1.3%.

**Mr Speaker:** I am immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but that is an expression of opinion and political debate, which is not a matter for arbitration by the Chair.

**Hilary Benn:** I shall also vote for amendment (j) tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), and amendment (i) in the names of the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey).

Whatever happens, it is now quite clear that we are going to need more time. One day, the Prime Minister will stand up at the Dispatch Box—unless she is required by the House to do so before then—and say, “I am now applying for an extension to article 50.” Although she may not be willing today to face up to the real choices that confront us, the day will soon come when she will have to, because there is a choice to be made in this House about the future relationship that we want.

As the Prime Minister is asking for suggestions, here is mine: we should ask the European Union now to negotiate the details of the future relationship. When the EU says, “Well, we can’t do that; of course we can’t sign an agreement,” we can point to paragraph 23 of the political declaration, which mentions

“no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions”. It talks about building and improving on “the single customs territory…which obviates the need for checks on rules of origin.”
Note that it says “no tariffs”, not zero tariffs. No tariffs means a customs union. The problem is that the Prime Minister cannot bring herself to say those words. If we have been able, in the negotiations thus far, to reach agreement on something as specific as no tariffs, there is no reason in principle that we cannot do the same with all the other things that need to be sorted out. If that did happen, the fears on the Government Benches and the Opposition Benches about what the future relationship might look like could be resolved, and at that point, while remaining members of the EU, we could vote on whether we accepted the withdrawal agreement.

While I very much hope that the House of Commons will take control of the process, I absolutely agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield, who said that there is nothing unconstitutional about us doing our job. There is nothing unconstitutional about my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford in effect bringing forward a private Member’s Bill and, through her amendment—if it is successful—putting it on the Order Paper for 5 February.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I am concluding.

We pass private Members’ Bills every year and there is nothing wrong about that. We need to take control of the process because the Government have clearly lost control of it. The moment will come when we have to decide what we want, and not just how we get to the point of decision. For any progress to be made on that in future, what we will need more than anything else—the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) alluded to this in his intervention—is open minds, rather than minds that are closed to the risks that are now facing our country.

Mr Speaker: There is now a six-minute time limit.

4.48 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who spoke with great wisdom and clarity, as always.

A no-deal Brexit would have not just a huge economic cost, but a huge human cost, and that is what drove me to table amendment (i). The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and I are co-authors of this amendment, and we are neighbours. We have seen the lives of our constituents transformed by the renaissance of manufacturing in our region. It now exports more than any other region to the EU, which is its principal market. But Brexit is putting this at risk. As a group of cross-party MPs, we began meeting six months ago to discuss how to help, as we are already losing jobs—not just because of Brexit, but it has made it worse. We co-authored a letter to the Prime Minister calling for a no-deal Brexit to be ruled out, and I thank those who signed it. It attracted 225 signatures from MPs of six parties from all over Britain. The signatories are remainers and leavers, but we agree on one thing—we are against a no-deal Brexit.

Hardly a day goes by without another business calling for no deal to be prevented. Yesterday, it was the supermarkets, which fear their shelves will be empty. Before that, it was the security analysts advising us of increased risks and before that, Airbus, Rolls-Royce, Siemens, Ford, and the National Farmers Union and other farming organisations. The list is simply endless. The CBI has described this as a monumental act of self-harm to be avoided at all costs. Crashing out without a deal simply makes our exports instantly less competitive.

The Government say that it is not their policy to leave with no deal, so let us rule it out. The threat of no deal has been used as a stick to get more concessions, but in my view that card has played out. It has not secured the needed changes, as on the backstop, for example. So as a former negotiator, I would flip that card round the other way as a carrot, offering to take no deal off the table in return for concessions that will get the deal over the line.

I want to be clear: I am not blocking Brexit. I am committed to honouring the referendum result. I voted for the withdrawal agreement; I have read all 585 pages. I urge colleagues perhaps to have a fresh look at it. It may not be perfect, but local businesses tell me that it is good enough and works for them.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): In addition to the businesses themselves, does my right hon. Friend welcome the communications from the workers in those businesses, particularly Jaguar Land Rover, who have communicated with Members of Parliament such as myself to tell me their concerns about a no-deal Brexit?

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend is quite right. As a fellow west midlander, he will know that many of us had a personal handwritten letter, or an original email, about the impact—the human cost—on our constituents’ lives, which we simply cannot ignore.

I know that others need persuading about the withdrawal agreement. I encourage colleagues to read the document produced by the House of Commons Library, “What if there’s no Brexit deal?” This document could usefully inform six days of debate, because we ought to debate what the House of Commons Library tells us are the really important issues that we need to consider.

Heidi Allen: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am short of time now, so I ask my hon. Friend to allow me to continue.

As no deal looms, just think of the human cost. Hundreds of young people like the single mums on my council estates got apprenticeships, then well-paid work in manufacturing, and now their jobs are at risk. Voting no to no deal means that we must agree a deal. The longer the uncertainty continues, the harder it gets for business. Stockpiling is costly and inefficient—the cost comes off the bottom line, and in the end that costs jobs. Just-in-time supply chains will be “not-in-time” with any hold-up at the border, and some factories are already stopping production to limit the disruption.

If we agree that no deal is not an option, then it is incumbent on all party leaders to get round the table—and I think I heard the Leader of the Opposition say today that he would. The Malthouse initiative is an example of a new contribution to break the deadlock. But to
4.55 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): We have had an emotional and raucous debate, whereas, as the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said, the people outside are looking for something rather more calm, deliberative and constructive.

The central issue we are addressing today is how we dispose of the no-deal option. As the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) pointed out, there is an overwhelming majority in this place to do that, and a whole series of amendments have been tabled to achieve it. The amendments go about it in different ways: the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) is a declaratory statement; the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield wants a better process; and the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford want more time. None of the amendments in themselves provides a solution, but they are an important and positive step on the way, and we should support them.

The issue we have to address is why the whole concept of no deal is out there. Let us be clear: it is a choice. It will not be imposed on the UK by the European Union. The UK has the legal authority to stop it, and if it is not stopped, it is a choice. It is out there because there is a complex game of chicken going on. The option of no deal was used initially to try to frighten the European Union, but that had no effect whatever. It has been used to frighten wavering Members of Parliament; we will see how many do waver. It certainly had an impact on frightening business.

One thing that worries me about today’s debate is that this game of chicken has now acquired a dangerous new twist. If there is support for the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), the Government will go back to Europe to ask for what they call “alternative arrangements”, but we have no idea what those are. I have heard no mention today of Chequers. Does anybody remember Chequers? Six months ago, the Prime Minister held a special summit to discuss alternative arrangements. The best brains in Britain were employed to look at technological solutions, and the others were rejected. There were no alternative arrangements. Has somebody invented something in the last six months? If so, we have not been told about it. I am not always cynical, but I think there is nothing in it, although that remains to be seen.

The Government will go back to the European Union, and the EU will be very polite—I think it genuinely wants to help the Government—but it will ask, “What is all this about?” and it will say no, not because it wants to but because it has to. The Government will then come back here, and there will be another round of anger. I am sure that it will not be the Prime Minister or the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West, but people will say, “Ah, you see? It’s all these bloody Europeans. They’re blocking it and pushing us out. They’re going to cause mayhem. It’s all their fault.” The ugly nationalism lurking under the surface will bubble up. That is what is in store, and the Government’s action today makes that more likely.

We talk about no deal as if it is a hypothetical possibility, but it is real, and it is now. Partly because of the job I had in the coalition Government, I spend a lot of time talking to businesses big and small around the country, and they all say to me that no deal is happening now. They are having contracts cancelled, either directly or because a company down the supply chain is losing a contract. They are piling up inventories that they do not need, at great cost. Estate agents are having travel cancelled because of the need for three months’ notice. The impact is already being felt. Companies are absorbing it, as they would, but a few months down the track, the economic impact will be very real.

The private enterprise system depends on what Keynes called “animal spirits”, and one of the animal spirits is panic. There is a real danger now of panic getting hold in the way it did 10 years ago in a different way in the financial crisis. The longer we leave no deal on the table, the greater the risk of that happening and of its consequences.

There are other alternatives, and there is one we are not discussing tonight. The Prime Minister is quite right when she says, as she often does, that the alternative to no deal is a deal. She is absolutely right, but there are two deals already on the table: there is the one she has negotiated, and the one we already have. There is also the option that we are not debating today, but which I think we will probably come back to, of saying we should put that choice to the public. The Government say this is horrendous and that it will stir up deep social divisions, but I just ask her to consider whether the social divisions that might be accentuated in that way are greater than the social divisions that would be created if we have a no-deal world, which we are in danger of heading towards. That is why I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues will return—I am sure there will be a greater appetite for this in a few weeks’ time—to considering the option of going back to the public to have the final say.

5 pm

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me. I think the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) should
beware that, while perhaps not wishing to do so, he may sometimes be talking up the possibility of panic and spreading gloom and despondency unnecessarily. I have a short time available to me, but I will take less than the six minutes if I possibly can, because my points are few and simple.

In the more than 21 years since I have been in the House, I have to say that this is the first time I have experienced tabling an amendment and then winning the support of a Prime Minister for it. In her opening remarks, the Prime Minister did of course mention amendment (n). I rise to support the amendment that stands in my name and those of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—elected, of course, by the whole House—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), as well as many others on both sides of the House.

I will oppose the amendments that seek to delay the article 50 process and those that might rule out some of the options. I do so without any suggestion that these are necessarily deliberately intended to damage the process of Brexit, but I think they carry considerable dangers in them. Those who seek to delay the process risk removing the pressure point or decision point—the moment of decision—that is bringing greater focus to the negotiations at this point. It has been palpable in the last couple of weeks that we have seen more evidence of flexibility from the EU side in the negotiations and a greater willingness to look at how it might assist the United Kingdom to come to an arrangement with which we can agree that can take us out of the European Union in an orderly and managed way. There is a real danger in that.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What legally binding change to the arrangements does the hon. Gentleman now feel the EU will sign up to that it would not have signed up to a few weeks ago?

Sir Graham Brady: I will come on to those matters. I have very little time, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that that is my intention in speaking in this debate.

First, however, I wish to turn to the amendments that deal with procedure. I entirely accept what my right hon. and learned Friend the Father of the House said: it is the right of this House to change procedure. However, I would make a slightly different point, which is that I think it is unwise to change procedure without forethought. It is unwise to change procedure on the hoof or to do it for a particular purpose.

Heidi Allen: Does my hon. Friend appreciate that the reason why Members on both sides of the House are having to table such amendments is that we have had over two years of Parliament not being involved in the biggest decision facing our country for generations? The fact that we have been ignored means we have not been able, in a representative democracy, to represent our constituents.

Sir Graham Brady: My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) made it very clear that he welcomed some of the changes that have taken place, as well as the debate that we are having, but that was not a dramatic procedural change; I am talking about things that go right to the heart of how this place is run. As Mr Speaker will recall, many years ago I had the pleasure of serving on the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, which became known as the Wright Committee, and I have a long history of interest in reform of Parliament. I am very proud of changes that we achieved, and we sought to achieve others as well. However, I warn colleagues of the danger of doing these things without considerable forethought and consideration; we are often stuck with changes for many years or decades, and they can have unintended consequences.

I shall speak briefly to my amendment (n). I tabled it having seen the agreement reached at Chequers and the progress made towards a withdrawal agreement that clearly not all of us could embrace with great enthusiasm. It became obvious to me, for a variety of reasons, including the fact that we do not have an overall majority in the House of Commons and the complexity of the arrangements, that it would be necessary to compromise. As we worked towards the withdrawal agreement, I thought we might reach a point at which there was a compromise that we could embrace, if only with a lack of huge enthusiasm. However, there was in the withdrawal agreement one compromise too far. It was not, it is important to say, the whole concept of a backstop. The compromise too far was the possibility that, as brought forward, the backstop arrangement, which was explicitly never intended to be other than temporary, could become a permanent arrangement, and so lock in a situation in which Northern Ireland was treated differently from the rest of the United Kingdom perpetually and in which the whole United Kingdom was locked in the customs union in perpetuity. That is why I could not support the withdrawal agreement when we voted two weeks ago, and I know it was the most important, but not the only, reason why so many Conservative colleagues—and, I think, Democratic Unionist colleagues—were unable to bring themselves to support the agreement.

After the defeat of the agreement by such a big majority, the fashionable idea took hold that there was simply nothing that the House could agree—no majority for any arrangement that could possibly deliver the result of the referendum and take us out of the European Union in an orderly fashion. I do not believe that that is true. I hope to demonstrate with amendment (n) that there is an agreement that can win majority support in the House of Commons. By voting for the amendment, we can send the Prime Minister back to Brussels to negotiate, having strengthened her hand.

Lady Hermon rose—

Sir Graham Brady: I would very much like to give way to the hon. Lady, but I have used up my two allowed interventions.

We can send the Prime Minister back in a strengthened position, able to say that she has a real mandate from this House, and to ask for real change.

5.8 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I rise to speak to amendment (j), which is in my name and the name of other right hon. and hon. Members, and to express
support for the amendments tabled by the Leader of the Opposition, by my right hon. Friends the Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve).

I am motivated to move amendment (j) because I want so much to rule out leaving without a deal on 29 March. If there is just a month before we are due to leave the European Union and we do not have a deal, extending article 50 is the way to achieve ruling that out. I come to this debate with the evidence we have taken on the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ringing in my ears. Businesses have many views about where, and with what sort of deal, they want to end up, but what unites them is a determination not to crash out of the European Union without any deal at all, because of the impact that would have on free and frictionless trade, which businesses have grown to rely on through our membership of the European Union over the past decades.

We heard evidence from Honda, which warned our Select Committee that every 15 minutes of delay at the border cost £850,000; from the Food and Drink Federation, which talked about how European businesses could “hoover up the markets that have previously been well served by UK companies”; from pharmaceutical companies; and most recently from the British Retail Consortium.

Emma Reynolds: Does my hon. Friend agree that the threat of no deal is already having a material effect? Businesses in the west midlands tell me that they are postponing investment decisions because of the threat of no deal.

Rachel Reeves: Does my hon. Friend agree that the continued uncertainty is trying to secure through legislation an extension to article 50 if needed, because so many of us have lost trust and lost faith in this Government. They have let us down on too many occasions. My amendment does not seek to go as far, although I very much support her amendment and will be voting for it this evening.

Mr Betts: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachel Reeves: I will not give way, because of the time, if that is okay.

My amendment is very simple. It calls on the Government to extend article 50 in the event that we do not have a deal by 26 February. The Prime Minister could still come back to the House on 13 or 14 February and if she can get her deal through Parliament, the amendment will become irrelevant. The Prime Minister still has another month to secure agreement, but the amendment would give us further time if that is necessary. My amendment does not specify an amount of time for which we should extend article 50. It would be up to the Government to agree that with our counterparts in the European Union.

My amendment differs from amendment (b) tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. My right hon. Friend, rightly, is trying to secure through legislation an extension to article 50 if needed, because so many of us have lost trust and lost faith in this Government. They have let us down on too many occasions. My amendment does not seek to go as far, although I very much support her amendment and will be voting for it this evening.

There are many alternatives, so let us explore them with the time that we have left. Let us try to find consensus and compromise. Let us not box ourselves in, get this wrong and have to live with the consequences either of a bad deal or of crashing out without a deal. We are all under conflicting pressures. We have duties to our constituents and obligations to our parties, and we must also listen to our consciences. I believe that, on such issues, we must put those interests aside and act in the national interest. We must rise to that challenge when we vote this evening.

My message to right hon. and hon. Members about the merits of my amendment, and why I hope they will support it, is straightforward. If they voted to leave and
want to see Brexit resolved but are worried about the danger of a no-deal Brexit, it would remove that risk. If they are pushing for a Norway-plus solution, it would keep open that possibility. If they are looking to protect environmental standards, consumer and workers’ rights, the customs union and a strong single market deal, it would allow them to continue making that argument and win it. If they want a people’s vote, but accept that the immediate priority must be to take no deal off the table, it is a key part of that process.

With the countdown clock ticking down by the day, we must all work together and agree a way forward by joining forces to end any prospect of a no-deal Brexit. We must have time to come up with a workable solution. We must not let down our country and crash out of the European Union without a deal, so I urge hon. Members to support my amendment.

Mr Speaker: A five-minute limit now applies.

5.16 pm

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who made her case powerfully and cogently. I want to strengthen the hand of this Prime Minister and this Government in returning to Brussels. I believe that there is a range of changes that would render the withdrawal agreement—in particular, the backstop—acceptable to me and to hon. Members across the House.

There could be a sunset mechanism or an exit mechanism, over which we exercise control but with assurances to our friends and partners in Dublin about its exercise. I listened very carefully to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), who talked about whether that is possible. It is possible. Michel Barnier said very clearly on 24 January, in relation to a no-deal scenario, that the EU side “would be obliged to carry out controls on goods arriving in the Republic of Ireland. My team have worked hard to study how controls can be made paperless or decentralised, which will be useful in all circumstances.”

He later confirmed and clarified: “We will have to find an operational way of carrying out checks and controls without putting back in a border.”

We must be clear that this is not a question whether it can be done; it is a political choice. Paragraph 23 of the political declaration was clarified to make clear a transition to a best-in-class free trade agreement.

In the brief time available, let me address the two key amendments. I listened very carefully to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and I am worried about the constitutional precedent that she would set. Most of all, her amendment and the Bill that would follow purport to be neutral in relation to process, but in their substance they are a Pandora’s box. They would mandate a nine-month extension for negotiations, but the EU has ruled out such a long extension.

Yvette Cooper: To make it absolutely clear, the intention is not to mandate nine months. I think that would be very unhelpful. The point is that any motion that is tabled at the end of February should be amendable, and it should be for the House to decide at that point. If necessary, we can make that clearer as the Bill progresses to avoid any unhelpful conclusions.

Dominic Raab: I thank the right hon. Lady for that, but the Bill states nine months very clearly, and the EU has made it clear that it would need to know the strategic objective of any extension.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con) rose—

Mr Harper rose—

Dominic Raab: I will make a bit of progress, and then I will certainly take at least one more intervention.

The Bill nowhere sets out the substance of the approach that the right hon. Lady would seek to pursue. It is not clear if it is the Norway option or the second referendum option. It is neutral—in fact, it is empty—on the substance. I have listened to her carefully and with respect throughout these debates, and I will take her advice. Back in February 2018, she said:

“The Government have said they do not want to be in the single market, but they have not told us what they want instead… the clock is ticking and when you are running out of time, you cannot keep kicking the can down the road”—[Official Report, 5 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1212-13.]

And yet that is precisely what her amendment and Bill would do. Just last November, on the 500 pages of the Government’s withdrawal agreement and political declaration, she said to the House:

“This is not a deal for the future; it is just a stopgap… We have no idea where this is heading”—[Official Report, 26 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 33.]

Again, I gently and respectfully say that her amendment and Bill are vulnerable to the very charge that she herself levelled at the Government and the Prime Minister. Just moments ago—I listened to her speech carefully and with respect—she talked about avoiding a blindfold Brexit, but I am afraid her approach is precisely a blindfold approach.

It is not clear whether the right hon. Lady backs the Norway option or a second referendum, but I worry most that, as she said, the period is amendable. Without her setting out a positive proposal, I am afraid there is the understandable fear that it is a ruse to reverse or frustrate Brexit. There will be people who, because of the absence of her setting out a substantive credible alternative, will fear just that.

Nick Boles: My right hon. Friend persists in ignoring what the right hon. Lady told him about the true intention of the Bill, which I support. It is very clear that, if amendment (b) were passed, there would be two opportunities to amend the length of the extension, both during the Bill’s passage through all its Commons stages next Tuesday, when a majority would be required, and through the motion the Government would need to table on 26 February. It is entirely scurrilous to suggest there is a hidden plot to revoke Brexit when both she and I have been explicit that we would never vote for it. The only way it could be amended is if there was a majority in Parliament.

Dominic Raab: The problem my hon. Friend has is that, although he has powerfully made the case for the Norway option, I have also read the cogent case made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for
Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) in *The Sunday Times* for why that is wrong and we should have a second referendum. With just two months to go until Brexit, the amendment is a climbing frame for everyone with a different view. I fear most, however, that this would encourage the EU to delay at the eleventh hour of the negotiations in the hope that we will settle for worse terms and undermine the Prime Minister at exactly the point we need to reinforce her hand.

I turn to amendment (n), tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). Initially, I thought this rather a vague amendment, but I understand precisely what he is seeking to achieve. The Government should have tabled an amendment of their own, but the Prime Minister has come to the Chamber and given three assurances: one, that the changes we will seek will be legally binding changes to the withdrawal agreement; two, that she will seriously consider the substantive proposals in what I can only call the Mogg-Morgan-Malthouse compromise; and three, that the revised deal will be returned to this House for a further, effectively meaningful vote. On that basis, I will vote for the amendment. I want to send the Prime Minister back to Brussels with a strong and clear sense of what this House will accept. That is the best way—in fact, the only way—to get a deal acceptable to the House and the country.

5.24 pm

**Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab). Let me say at the outset that we have had very good discussions with the Government and, indeed, with Back Benchers in both parties in recent days, and that, for the reasons that he gave, we agree that the right approach is to vote for amendment (n) in order to give the Prime Minister the backing that will indicate to the European Union that there is a way through this which can command support in the House.

The Prime Minister’s agreement to bring back any final deal for a meaningful vote, the fact that she will seek legally binding changes, what she has said about reopening the withdrawal agreement, and the fact that serious consideration will be given to options that can bring together those on the Brexiteer and remain sides of the argument are all powerful reasons for supporting the amendment. I believe that there is a way through the current difficulties and deadlock, but some of the options presented in other amendments do not, in my view, command a majority. We must be realistic about that.

We, certainly on these Benches, want a deal: we do not want a no-deal outcome. However, the idea of taking no deal off the table is more likely to lead to a no-deal outcome than anything else, because that is exactly what will ensure that the EU holds out and gives absolutely nothing in any future negotiations. I have dealt with the Irish Government—Irish Governments of different hues—over many years, and that is exactly the approach that they have told us they will take, so it should not come as any surprise.

The Prime Minister has focused on the issue of the backstop. We have some other issues with the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, but the backstop is the main issue, and if it is dealt with, that will mean that we can get a withdrawal agreement through the House. I do not need to rehearse all the reasons why the backstop was so difficult for us as Unionists. However, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) described it as damaging to the Union, the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) described it as a ridiculous proposition, and the Prime Minister herself has criticised it in strong terms as something that no one wants and everyone detests. Yet it remains at the heart of our debate. We must address the fact that with it in place, we cannot support the withdrawal agreement.

People say that the position cannot possibly be revised. However, as the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton has just said, Michel Barnier himself, when he had to deal this week with the criticism that came the way of the European Commission’s spokesperson who had said that there would have to be a hard border in the event of no deal, said “No, no, there does not have to be one.” I will not repeat the quotation that the right hon. Gentleman has just given, but the fact is that if we can have no hard border in a no-deal situation, that will certainly be possible in the event of a withdrawal agreement and a deal.

The position in the Irish Republic is not as homogeneous as people think. Its Prime Minister, Leo Varadkar, said the other day that in the event of no deal we would have to send troops to the Irish border. The Irish Government swiftly retreated from that. The Prime Minister was out in Davos. He may have been mixing with all sorts of characters—I do not know who those could possibly be—and he obviously got carried away with the rhetoric. Some wild stuff is being said.

One of the most damaging arguments, which is of concern to many Unionists—and we in the House speak for the vast bulk of Unionists who are concerned about the implications of the backstop—is that this is designed to protect the backstop and the Good Friday agreement, as amended by the St Andrews agreement. It does nothing of the sort. Lord Bew, one of the architects of, or the people behind, the Good Friday agreement, said in a recent article for Policy Exchange that it drives a coach and horses through the agreement. We need to be realistic about this.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): I believe that Lord Bew went even further in the other place last week, when he said:

“there is one great problem with the backstop: it does not protect the Good Friday agreement.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 5 December 2018; Vol. 794, c. 1012.]

He has made that point repeatedly. Surely that is the issue: as he has said, the backstop drives a coach and horses through the agreement.

**Nigel Dodds**: That is absolutely right, and I urge Members on both sides to read what Lord Bew has said. He voted to remain; he is a supporter of the Good Friday agreement; read what he said about this, instead of listening to some of the myths that are about. For instance there is the myth that the open border is part of the Good Friday agreement—the Belfast agreement. The Belfast agreement does not mention anything to do with an open border; this is a complete myth. What we want in Northern Ireland—on all sides—is no hard border on the island of Ireland; we in our party are absolutely committed to no hard border on the island of Ireland, but not at the expense of creating borders down the Irish sea with our biggest market and affecting the integrity of the United Kingdom.
That has got to be the sensible position, and I believe now that if we get behind the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) and send the Prime Minister out to Brussels with that strong support behind her, we can achieve something that people have said is not possible: we can get this deal sorted out for the good of all our country.

5.30 pm  
Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). I do so partly because the House now needs to say something positive. The Prime Minister was right when she said in her opening speech that we all know what we do not like collectively; we now have to start moving down the path quite quickly of things that we do like.

Three issues have arisen during this debate where I would invite Members on both sides to question the conventional wisdom. First, both sides appear to agree that there should be no more delay, but many in all parts of the House will be tempted by amendments tonight that will lead to more delay; that seems to me to be slightly incoherent. The second point that I have heard time and again is that there is something wrong with the Prime Minister radically changing the backstop arrangements when she put them forward so strongly. It seems to me that when something is put to the House of Commons and it is defeated by 230 votes, there is a certain degree of common sense involved in changing it radically. That seems to me to be sensible. Thirdly, there is the temptation, not just of colleagues in this House but people outside, to assume that everything said by anyone representing the Commission, the European Parliament or any other European body must be gospel whereas anything said by a British politician must be taken as a negotiating stance. Speaking as someone who is a lifelong pro-European and who campaigned hard for remain, I must say that we do need to show a bit more realism, and occasionally a bit more cynicism. Guy Verhofstadt has been quoted in this debate; good man though he is in many ways, I have never noticed him particularly advancing the interests of this country, nor is he paid to do so.

It is clear that given the result of the referendum—a narrow victory—the winners will win but the losing 48% who accept the result want a smooth and orderly Brexit. We need a new deal after the last vote and therefore several things are important. First, we need to start changing the tone of the debate both inside this Parliament and outside. We have seen some of the hatred and bile that has been introduced into our politics by the passions aroused on this, and it is the responsibility of us all to try to drain that bile—to try to improve the tone of the debate. Apart from one or two instances at the start, it seems to me that our debate this afternoon is a model of how to do it. We all respect each other’s views, and we know that everyone on all sides has strong views. Many of us who are not just conventionally hon. Friends but are actual friends will be going into different Division Lobbies tonight, and that is as it should be, as long as we can continue the civilised tone.

I support amendment (n) because it gives us the outline of a new deal that might be successful in negotiations with Europe and certainly gives the British Government a coherent position following the loss last time. I will not vote for any of the other amendments, partly for constitutional reasons. I think that the distinction between Parliament holding the Executive to account and Parliament trying to become a quasi-executive, even in limited terms, is a confusion that we should not consider.

Although other amendments are in some ways attractive, the amendment on the indicative vote is perhaps premature. I take the Prime Minister’s point that those of us who are very against no deal will have an opportunity to express that opposition. I am absolutely at one with those colleagues who say that no deal would be a disaster.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I just want to understand the import of what my right hon. Friend is saying. He and I are genuine friends but we will go through different Lobbies to vote on the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). I will also vote for amendment (n), which obviously we hope will succeed, but if it does not succeed and the Prime Minister comes back in the middle of February, as she has said she will, unwilling to ask for a delay, would he then change his mind about the constitutional propriety of avoiding a no-deal exit through Parliament?

Damian Green: I am delighted that my right hon. Friend is asking me to address hypothetical questions. Let us see where we are in two weeks’ time. Certainly, as I have said before, I will do whatever it takes to avoid a no-deal Brexit. The method chosen may not be exactly right, but he and others with immensely fertile brains may yet, I hope, have two weeks to think again or, even better, may not need to. I hope that the focusing of minds in this country is reflected by a focusing of minds in Brussels and, indeed, in Dublin.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that much the best way of guaranteeing that no deal does not happen is to keep no deal on the table so that we keep pressure on the European Union to talk in a serious manner?

Damian Green: My right hon. Friend may well be right. Certainly, throughout the negotiations, the Government have made the perfectly sensible point that anyone entering into a negotiation saying, “Whatever happens, I am going to take a deal at the end of it,” is unlikely to get a particularly brilliant result. To some extent, that is what happened to the British Government in the negotiations before the referendum. We all know that one of the things that might have changed the result would have been if David Cameron had come back with a better and more generous deal from Europe. I think there is a degree of validity in my right hon. Friend’s point, even though I think this may be the first time we have ever agreed on a European issue in our more than 20 years in this House.
Today is obviously important for the Government and for the negotiations, and it is also important for Parliament, because it gives Parliament a chance to be positive—not just to reject a deal, but to point a way forward. In a terrible time for democratic politics, this would be a glimmer of hope—a shaft of light—to show that this House can contribute to finding a solution to the most difficult political problem that this country has faced for decades. I hope that today and over the coming days the House and the Government can rise to the gravity of that problem.

5.38 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Prime Minister came along this afternoon and encouraged Parliament to drive a coach and horses through the agreement that she spent two years concluding and hour after hour at the Dispatch Box defending. She had a choice when the House rejected that agreement a couple of weeks ago. She could have tried to form a coalition across the House for common ground, but instead she chose to throw her lot in with the ERG to try to revise the backstop—something she has repeatedly said could not be done. She made it clear today that she is talking not just about the future political declaration but about legal change to the withdrawal agreement itself.

It should be remembered that this backstop is not some foreign imposition. The commitment to no hard border arises out of commitments that we have made as a country and that we repeated in the December 2017 phase 1 agreement with the European Union, but now we are committed to watering it down or doing something to undermine it.

I speak today to support the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), which try to avoid no deal. There are two reasons why I think we should do that.

The first is responsibility. Leaving the European Union without a deal in place would have extremely damaging consequences for the country, and it is our duty as responsible politicians to try to avoid them. There has been a legion of warnings, so let me just mention a couple.

Last week, the chief executive of Airbus, which directly employs 14,000 people in the country and sustains many of thousands more jobs, including many in Wolverhampton’s valuable aerospace cluster, warned that leaving on the basis of no deal would be a disaster, and the ideology behind it was “madness”. For his pains, he was attacked on the basis of his nationality. What has happened to our politics when that is what happens?

Also last week, the Road Haulage Association warned of chaos in transport if we go down the no-deal route. Just yesterday, Britain’s major food retailers warned of both shortages of food and higher prices for consumers if no deal happens. Who will pay the price for that? Our constituents on low incomes, who cannot afford higher food prices, will pay, as a result of right-wing nationalist ideology.

David T. C. Davies: I visited the port of Holyhead with at least one of the right hon. Gentleman’s colleagues on Monday. They said that it was time that MPs dampened down the hysteria about no-deal Brexit, and that they were quite prepared for it. That is what the officials in the port of Holyhead said to us yesterday.

Mr McFadden: I am quoting the chief executive of Airbus, the Road Haulage Association and the country’s major food retailers. These are not my warnings—these are their warnings.

There was a time when such things would have carried some weight, but we are in a time when our politics has so changed that such warnings are simply dismissed as irrelevant. Even worse, there are voices who almost lust for the chaos. I believe that, as responsible politicians, we should not will an end that brings about job losses or rising prices for our constituents. It is not the rich, right-wing ideologues who will pay the price. It is people who work in the manufacturing industry and people who need affordable food prices in the shops.

There is a second reason to avoid no deal. There is the argument that somehow we just need to get this thing over the line; that people are bored of Brexit, and they just want this done. That is irresponsible. It is simply not the case that we will be able to stop talking about this on 30 March, because all the big questions about the future remain unanswered. They have not been left for another day because that is in the national interest; they have been left for another day because to make the fundamental choice would upset one part of the Conservative party and would mean the slaying of the Brexit unicorns.

Of course it is tempting to tick the box and get a deal—any deal—over the line. There is maybe part of us that wishes to say to our constituents, “We have delivered you Brexit, and if it turns out to be not what you wished, well, that is not our problem.” That is an irresponsible illusion. We do no service to the public if we try to pull the wool over their eyes in exchange for a quiet life for ourselves in the short term. I understand the temptations of it, because of course some people are angry and frustrated, but many more will be angry if we are not candid with them about the Brexit future ahead.

The second reason to avoid no deal and to have an extension is therefore the opportunity to give clarity on the future ahead. We have not done that so far. The Prime Minister’s strategy is to avoid that for party reasons, to run down the clock and to have all the questions answered later. We have a greater duty to the country and our constituents, and that is the reason to avoid the strategy of running down the clock and to use an extension for the purpose of giving clarity about the country’s future, on the basis of the reality of Brexit and not the irreconcilable promises made about it thus far.

5.44 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Unlike the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), I am a very easy man to please. I voted for the Prime Minister’s first deal; I shall vote for whatever she brings back; and I am going to vote for the Brady amendment. I am past caring what deal we have; I will vote for it to get a smooth exit.

The fact is that tonight we are faced with a choice of huge significance for our country, but it is not about the deal we do or do not get eventually, which I suspect in
the long run will have to be done through some kind of consensus we have not yet found in this House. We are not really voting about that tonight.

The 29th of March is not an abstract fact; it is going to happen. There is going to be a 29 March, which is a real day, and what we are really voting about tonight is the question whether, in the absence of this House taking action, we will leave the EU without a deal—in fact, in the absence of the House taking action tonight rather than two weeks from now, because I do not believe that vote is really going to happen. I am perfectly aware that some very old friends of mine, whose integrity and passion I respect and admire, believe that leaving without a deal is a perfectly tolerable outcome, or even a good outcome, for this country. I respect that opinion, but I do not share it.

I am also aware that many people think the Conservative party will suffer if it is seen in any way to do anything that delays the exit date. I accept that there is some suffering, and I have experienced some of it in my constituency. I have experienced some of it through the tirades of those who send me emails and the like. I accept that.

What my hon. Friends ignore is what will happen, first, to this country, which should be our first preoccupation, and, secondly, to our party if we leave on 29 March, taking the risks involved in not having a deal, and it goes wrong. Incidentally, I entirely accept that it might be perfectly all right, but it might not. If it is not, it will be Conservative Members and our Government—it will not be Opposition Members, some unseen force or the EU—to whom those difficulties will be attributed by the population of our country. When the people elect a Government, they expect that Government to look after them and not to impose risks and difficulties.

If those risks materialise, our party will not be forgiven for many years to come. It will be the first time that we have consciously taken a risk on behalf of our nation, and terrible things will happen to real people in our nation because of that risk, and we will not be able to argue that it was someone else’s fault. I beg those Conservative Members who are still in doubt—I know there are many who are not—to consider that issue when we go into the Lobbies tonight.

Finally, I will say one word on the question whether amendment (b) and the Bill proposed by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) is some kind of constitutional outrage. The Father of the House spoke about it, as did my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and I will add a word.

It is a fine thing to debate constitutional process, but if one is going to do so, it is important to read the books. It is important to know what our constitution is. There is one pre-eminent authority on the law of our constitution, and the one thing that A. V. Dicey makes clearer than anything else in his very large book is that the House of Commons has undisputed control of its own procedures. The Standing Orders of the House of Commons, which Bagehot tells us are the nearest thing in this terrible constitutional melee to a constitution in our country, are under the control of this House. There is nothing improper, wrong or even unusual about changing Standing Orders by a majority of this House of Commons. Until 1906, the Government did not have control of the Order Paper. It was invented for a particular reason that the Government should have that control, but there is no need for them to have it in future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. After the next speaker, the time limit will have to be reduced to three minutes, because everybody has been taking interventions, which is very consistent with the rules of debate but, obviously, truncates the opportunities of other right hon. and hon. Members.

5.50 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am proud that my name is on amendments (o), (g), (b) and (j). We also support amendments (a) and (i), but not amendment (n). That is because the Brexiteers’ modest proposal to the problem of Ireland is Swiftian in its grotesquery, its historical ignorance and its single, 360°, all-encompassing blind spot.

In June 2016, the Prime Minister, in a last-ditch attempt to win the referendum, explained how customs checks between Northern Ireland and Ireland would be inevitable if we were pulled out of the EU. What followed was a series of warnings from customs experts, culminating in Eric Pickett, an authority in WTO rules and international law, telling MPs in February 2017 that giving Ireland special treatment would be a strict violation of WTO law. When Mrs May triggered article 50 a mere month later, with the help of the Labour party, she started the clock on Brexit without having the faintest idea how she might avoid running roughshod over the Good Friday agreement. Now, two years later, we are still debating whether or not we need a backstop designed to avoid the dangerous chaos of a hard border. All the while, the clock is ticking and this place cannot find a resolution, and all the while the Prime Minister’s status is sinking before our eyes. Will she take the peoples of the UK down with her? Or will she put all four nations before unforgivable party loyalty and turn to us for answers?

There are plenty of answers the Prime Minister could choose on today’s Order Paper. Not all of them perfect—some of them attempt to have cake and eat it—but some of them are necessary and rational compromises. They are necessary to avoid the no-deal-by-default scenario towards which we accelerate with every passing day. The Labour party’s indifference makes it just as culpable. Last night’s last-minute one-line Whip against the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill is illustrative of the Labour party’s intentional apathy towards all things Brexit. The amendment tabled by the Opposition Front-Bench team today is a masterclass in fence-sitting. Let me be clear: their self-serving ambiguity is paving the way to a no deal.

Brexit is a thinly veiled assumption by the British Government of their right to centralise power and concentrate wealth. I am not talking about taking back control and money from the EU; I am talking about using Brexit as an excuse to take powers back from Wales and spend ever more per head in London than in Wales than they currently do. The economic disparity between Wales and London is already the worst in the
European Union. It is not possible to overstate the grotesqueness of our current inequality. Inner London’s GDP is 614% of the EU average, while West Wales and the Valleys, where I live, possesses a regional GDP of 68% of the same EU average. Westminster has always seen fit to benefit most that which is closest to its heart, and its heart is in south-east England. As for the rest of us, we are as we always have been—peripheral, expendable, beyond the pale.

This place indulges itself with endless, abstract angels-on-a-pinhead debates about backstops, safe in the knowledge that most of us here will probably be all right in a no-deal scenario. I was in Holyhead yesterday, with the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies). What we were told by people in the port of Holyhead is that they probably can survive day one of no deal, but they have no idea what is happening in the weeks after that—they have no idea whatsoever. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is going there this week to deal with pets and racehorses; the grand national is a week after we come out and most of the horses come through Holyhead. We will be all right here in a no-deal scenario; it is real people, constituents we will be all right in a no-deal scenario. I was in Holyhead yesterday, with the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies).

What were we told by people in the port of Holyhead is that they probably can survive day one of no deal, but they have no idea what is happening in the weeks after that—they have no idea whatsoever. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is going there this week to deal with pets and racehorses; the grand national is a week after we come out and most of the horses come through Holyhead. We will be all right here in a no-deal scenario; it is real people, constituents of mine and of all hon. Members—the hill farmers, the factory workers, the mums and dads; and, ultimately, the children—who will pay the real price for our time-wasting. I beg the Prime Minister: let us move on, rule out no deal and allow the House to work, at least for once, for the people and not for her party.

Mr Speaker: A three-minute limit now applies on each Back-Bench speech.

5.54 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): With two months to go until 29 March, it is hardly surprising that we are once again debating our withdrawal from the European Union. It is pretty obvious that we should be much further ahead in the process. Of course, the warning signs have been there for months, as all Members have said: from the minute the backstop went down to the Chequers agreement and the withdrawal agreement, which were of course not right for our country. I voted against the withdrawal agreement.

At this crucial time, we need leadership, which is why I welcome the Prime Minister’s very clear statement today. She should be commended for the way she handled strong questioning and rightly addressed many of the challenges relating to the withdrawal agreement. She should be particularly commended for reopening the negotiations on the withdrawal agreement. I would like to hear more from the Government about whether they have engaged in discussions and are preparing to hear from the European Commission whether it is prepared, willing and able to reopen the negotiations and get that legally binding change to the withdrawal agreement.

It is right that we now concentrate all efforts on delivering the referendum mandate. We cannot have more statements or glorified letters of assurances; we must get that clear, legally binding change to the text of the withdrawal agreement. When the negotiations are reopened, we need to ensure that the right people are engaged and involved in the process.

Ian Paisley: Does the right hon. Lady agree that yes, obviously, a legal textual change is now being sought, but that should not come as any surprise because the words of amendment (n) are already in paragraph 27 of the political agreement, of which Europe has been aware since November last year?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, which is why there is now an opportunity for us to land a clear commitment on the future relationship and on every aspect of the trading relationship and to remove some of the ambiguity in the political declaration.

It is important to recognise—as I think all Members do—that Parliament must deliver on the referendum mandate, and we have the opportunity to do so. The Prime Minister was right to refer to Conservative colleagues who were on either side of the referendum argument but have put forward new proposals that seek to provide certainty and clarity. They seek to unite the country in getting that compromise, including by extending the key issues around implementation, replacing the backstop and supporting the future UK-EU free trade arrangement, as well as by seeking co-operation in security matters and guaranteeing citizens’ rights going forward.

I was reassured by the Prime Minister’s remarks today, which is why her hand should be strengthened when she goes back to Brussels. I have called for the Government to go back to Brussels again and again since I voted against the withdrawal agreement. We must leave on 29 March so that we can position ourselves as an outward-looking, global, free-trading country, and as a nation that is on that mission of economic and democratic renewal. I will support amendment (n). We must get that clear commitment on the future relationship and on every aspect of the trading relationship and to remove some of the ambiguity in the political declaration. We have to find the right degree of unity and compromise to strengthen the Government and the Prime Minister to go, as she herself stated today, back to Brussels to deliver for Britain.

5.58 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) is passionate about the Land Rover plant in her constituency, as I am passionate about the Jaguar plant in Erdington. The plants have transformed the lives of tens of thousands throughout Birmingham and the west midlands. Together, the two plants are a symbol of the success of the automotive industry. But we have lost a thousand jobs at the Jag over the past 12 months, and we recently saw the announcement of 4,500 job losses. That is why the chief executive of JLR, Ralf Speth, said no to no deal. With the greatest of respect, some right hon. Members on the Government Benches should show a degree of humility. There are some who pretend that they know more about cars than the people who make cars, more about building ships than the people who build ships and more about keeping our country safe than the head of counter-terrorism.

During the next stage, we have a duty to honour the outcome of the referendum and to do everything possible to reach agreement, but it is clear beyond any doubt that the deal on offer will not pass and that no serious progress is being made towards delivering a deal that will defend the national interests and also pass Parliament. Therefore, in saying no to no deal, the right hon. Member for Meriden and I hope that the Government listen. Everything possible in terms of cross-party negotiations needs to be done to reach an agreement, but, crucially, that needs to be underpinned by the amendment from my right hon. Friend the Member for...
Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), which would prevent us going over the cliff on 29 March if the Government refuse to listen.

The Government cannot be allowed to treat the House of Commons with contempt or to ignore the views of its Members. Going into a serious negotiation, we have to move beyond the Tory party talking to itself. We must do right by the country. It should no longer be, “My deal or no deal,” and no longer should we be taken ever closer to the cliff. All this matters for the security of our country, for medicines, for industry, for farming, for food and for retail. The voices are loud and clear and they need to be listened to.

In conclusion, I am someone of an Irish background, but I am also someone who believes in a proud United Kingdom. This is a great country with great potential. I do not want us to become a fearful, fractured, inward-turning country at the margins of Europe—a country that is weakened in the world and impoverished for a generation. Our destiny is to be a truly great Britain—not a country plunging into the abyss and decades of despair, which is what will happen if we go out on 29 March without a deal.

6.1 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I have followed three principles since the country voted to leave the European Union: to respect the referendum result and deliver Brexit; not to have a second referendum; and to avoid no deal. I voted to implement article 50. I supported the withdrawal agreement out of my own free will with no offers of gongs or jobs. Members can imagine therefore that I have taken with a pinch of salt the protestations—the butter-would-not-melt-in-my-mouth protestations—of the hard Brexiteers as they wish the Prime Minister well, with a heavy heart, as they send her back to Brussels, assuring her of their good will.

I will continue to support the Prime Minister. I supported her when the hard Brexiteers tried to oust her as Prime Minister; I supported her in the no-confidence vote; and tonight in the Lobby I will support her. I will vote for the Grieve amendment. The Prime Minister says that it is time for Parliament to say what it wants, not what it does not want. This is what the Grieve amendment does, and it is a modest constitutional proposal. I do not support the ERG in its proposal to prorogue—the first such prorogation of Parliament since Charles I—or in its instruction to Her Majesty not to pass Parliament’s legislation. I support merely a modest amendment that supports the Prime Minister.

I support the Spelman amendment, because I do not want no deal. The Prime Minister has said from the Dispatch Box that she wants to avoid no deal. I back the Prime Minister and I back Spelman. I support the Cooper amendment because the Prime Minister needs time to get her deal right, because I know that the hard Brexiteers will vote her down on 14 February, so she needs the time to get things right. I back Cooper and I back Boles. I am afraid, however, that, because I support the Prime Minister I cannot support the Brady amendment. I back the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement, and unlike some people in this House, I will not turn my back on it and neuter it with a fake clause, pretending that it is amending an agreement when it is doing no such thing.

I wish the Prime Minister well in the full knowledge that Parliament can come forward and actually say what it wants to do. Our bluff can be called and we can come forward with our own proposals. I back her in her withdrawal agreement and I back her in avoiding no deal. I am pleased and delighted to remain a loyal supporter of the Prime and her policy on Brexit.

6.4 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): It was embarrassing to be part of the pantomime that started this debate earlier and that could not contrast more with the levels of anxiety that I hear out there in the country whenever I am allowed to go home. These debates have largely generated far more heat than light, and I have been glad to hear many Members, in the debate that has ensued, recognise that we are breaking our democracy. We urgently have to build common ground. That is why amendment (f) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), which seeks to narrow down the options with a series of indicative votes, is an incredibly helpful suggestion. So, too, is amendment (h) in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), along with myself and many others, proposing a citizens’ assembly. This has been used as a mechanism in many other countries, including Ireland, to break similarly controversial deadlocks.

The importance of amendment (h) is that the 46 MPs who are signatory to it come from all different Brexit positions and none. That proves that there are a number of us in this House who are willing to step out of the trenches and start to compromise. This matters because HOPE not hate produced a report today that clearly shows that attitudes around the country are hardening and people’s willingness to compromise is being reduced.

We are seeing fear, anger and a rise in activity from the far right in that fertile ground in a way that I have not seen since I was growing up as a child in the 1980s.

It is astonishing that the Prime Minister came here today still talking to the House as if she can have it both ways. She told my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) that she is seeking to strengthen workers’ rights, but then she told this House that she is backing the Baker plan, which on page 31 junks the non-regression clause and seeks to dilute existing employment rights protections. The Prime Minister seems determined to tilt right and try to get this through with a small group of hard Brexiteers in her own party, but how does she honestly think that she is going to maintain that fragile coalition all the way through the legislation that will be required to pass this?

That is why, reluctantly, I have come to the conclusion that today I will support amendment (b) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). That is not because I think that extending article 50 to the end of the year is by any means sustainable; it is not and the public will not accept it. They will not forgive us if we go over the summer and try to re-elect MEPs to a Parliament that we were supposed to have left three months before.

There is not enough understanding in this House of how little trust there is that we mean what we say when we say we respect the result of the referendum, and we cannot afford to kick the can down the road any longer.
But this amendment is now the only mechanism that this House has to try to avoid a no-deal scenario and to start making real decisions about how we are going to respect the result of the referendum, protect jobs and heal this divided country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh! Well, I would have called a particular hon. Gentleman who seems to have beetled out of the Chamber. That is most unfortunate. I hope the fellow is not indisposed. But Mr Charles Walker is here, and that is important.

6.7 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I have an admission to make: I am not an intellectual. [Hon. Members: “No!”] No, I am not. I really have tried it for the past few months, but I just cannot get on with it, so I am not going to give a highbrow, intellectual speech. My speech will be more of a three-minute cry of frustration, because I really, really do want to leave the EU; I have campaigned for it for a number of years and I am very keen to go.

We have talked at length about unicorns, and the proudest stallion unicorn of all is the unicorn of perfection—a unicorn that caners across broken fields with unrealisable dreams underfoot. But the unicorn of perfection must sadly be slayed, because perfection does not exist. When I am out in my constituency, meeting people who do not email me and do not write to me, so they are not self-selecting, they say three things to me: “Get on. Get on. Get on.” These people voted to leave. These people voted to remain. But they want to get on and they want this Parliament to make a decision. They have accepted the result of the referendum.

It will be impossible for this House to come up with a perfect deal—a bowl of porridge that everyone finds to their satisfaction. But we can find something that 80% of our fair-minded constituents can get behind and say, “Do you know what? As a fair-minded citizen of this country, I’d have liked a little more of that and a little less of this, but I can live with it. I can get on and move on, and we can have certainty.” It is impossible for this House to appeal to the implacable 10% who bookend the 80%—the remainers who want to remain at any cost and the leavers who want to leave at any cost. The demands of these people cannot be met by this House.

That is why tonight I will be supporting the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). I will go through that Division Lobby to hopefully give the Prime Minister further instruction to go back to the EU and deliver a deal that 80% of my country and my constituents can unite behind.

6.10 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): We have 59 days to go, or, as James Melville said on Twitter a little earlier, 28 parliamentary sitting days to go.

Last time I spoke on this, as you probably remember, Mr Speaker. I mentioned Fintan O’Toole’s book, “Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain”, and the pain we are all feeling at the moment. The quote I used then was the Turkish proverb.

“An Englishman will burn his bed to catch a flea.” It is worth reflecting a bit more on what Brexit has done. The methodology of Brexit, Fintan O’Toole points out in the book, is this:

It will triumph by teaching the English to take trivial things—the petty annoyances of regulation—very seriously indeed, and to regard the serious things—jobs, communities, lives—with sincere and studied triviality.”

That is what we are seeing in the middle of this Brexit nonsense. All options of Brexit are bad. The Prime Minister knows this. In a slight of hand today, she alluded to it by talking of the balance between the referendum and the economics. But of course, if we look at the economics alone, this is a bad deal.

The Government have got themselves into the invidious position of making promises to Ireland and making promises to other people that they would be outside the customs union and the single market and still have frictionless trade. I am talking of unicorns and made-up fantasies. They then had an opponent at a negotiation saying, “This is nonsense. Give us some assurance, have a backstop,” and the backstop came along. Now this House is saying, “See that backstop, that assurance we gave on the fantasies we were talking about—we now want you to negotiate away our assurance and our fantasies.” Westminster has got to take a step back and see the nonsense it is finding itself in.

Amendment (q) was not selected today, but I would encourage people in future to join the queue. It is an amendment to revoke article 50, tabled in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). This is something the UK has control of until 29 March. The UK can get itself out of the hole it has dug for itself through the fantasies that Mr O’Toole expanded on greatly in his book. A lot could be done to prevent the damage that is coming down the road. If we leave on 29 March or in December 2020, MPs here, particularly whoever is in the governing party, will have to face that. Maybe this is one of the reasons Labour does not want a general election. Who wants to be the Government on 29 March or in December 2020 when you leave and you have queues in Dover, you are damaging the economy and you have empty shelves? Whoever is holding the parcel when that music stops is going to find themselves in great trouble.

Ian Paisley: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the genius in any negotiation is to achieve an agreement and that agreement implies that two sides have come to a common cause? Is not the fatal flaw of what Europe has done that it has not accepted that Britain cannot agree with this?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: No. The agreement was reached. This is the funny thing. The agreement was reached, and now the Prime Minister, having not talked to the House of Commons, comes back to the House of Commons and finds that it thinks that her agreement is a dud agreement. She has now been sent to scurry back to Europe to beg the Europeans because the shire Tories want something different. They had an agreement but then they were scared of the agreement and sent the Prime Minister to go and get another one. In the beginning, we did not want any parliamentary involvement at all. Conservative parliamentarians, in particular, were abdicating their responsibility as MPs and hiving this
off to the Government. Then when the Government came back, it was not good enough, deepening the mess of Brexit. This is exactly the problem we have here today.

We should take a further step and consider this idea that going out of the customs union and the single market is bad for you. There are about 12 customs unions across the world between about 100 countries. The exceptionalism about the UK is utterly baffling, and it is so baffling because these people are trying to damage their communities and their businesses. It does not matter how often we say it, but this is the point of Brexit. This is what Brexit is going to end up with—damage to jobs and damage to business. Airbus and other companies are dismissed because, as Fintan O’Toole said, the serious things are regarded with “studied triviality”. I am at the end of my tether trying to talk to these guys. This is why Scotland is moving on. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said, we are moving towards independence—we have to. This is a mess.

6.14 pm

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): In the short time available to me, I will not try to match my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who said almost everything that I would have said and much more entertainingly. I will try to explain why I have taken a step that many of my hon. Friends consider to be somewhat rash—the step of signing the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and supporting the Bill promoted by her.

The reason I have done so is that on the morning after the referendum, I sent a message to my constituents in which I committed to do my best to make a success of Brexit. Since then, I have left hospital in a wheelchair to vote for triggering article 50, and I have voted with the Government in every single Division on the withdrawal Act and every other piece of legislation advancing the delivery of a successful Brexit—unlike, I would point out, 117 of my fellow members of the Conservative party, including all the members of the ERG.

I am seriously committed to making a success of Brexit, but there are two parts to that sentence. There is Brexit and there is success, and Brexit on 29 March with no deal will not be a success. It will be a disaster. It will sour the British people against the operation of their Government for a generation, and I cannot have that on my conscience.

I will tell the House what the proposed amendment and Bill would do. They would rule out a no-deal Brexit on 29 March. They do not rule out a no-deal Brexit forever, because the only way of doing that is to revoke Brexit. I will never vote for that, and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford will never vote for that. I do not believe that more than 100 Members of this House will ever vote to revoke Brexit, because that would be a political disaster at least as cataclysmic as the economic and human disaster of a no-deal Brexit on 29 March.

What we seek is to buy ourselves a little time to find a compromise and make a success of Brexit. I hope that we will be successful with this amendment tonight, but if we are not, it will be because the Prime Minister made a pledge at the Dispatch Box to come back to the House on 14 February with a motion that is equivalent to this one, and equally amendable. My hon. Friends and I from across the House will move an equivalent amendment again, with an equivalent Bill attached, and I hope that Members will support them.

6.17 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Prime Minister is asking the House to back an amendment to a deal that she said could not be amended, to give her a mandate to negotiate with the EU that she said she never needed and to reopen a withdrawal agreement that she insisted could not be reopened. I do not know whether the Prime Minister genuinely believes that she can get the EU to reopen negotiations despite the fact that it has said it will not; whether she has finally succumbed to the ERG’s myth that she just has to somehow stand up to the EU and it will give us all the benefits of membership with none of the responsibilities; or whether she knows that this is all a charade and is in fact continuing her plan to run down the clock and blackmail MPs into backing her bad deal, because leaving the EU with no deal is even worse.

What I do know is that we are in a complete and utterly mess. Many Members of this House know that, and members of the public know it, too. The mess has been caused by a lack of honesty about the choices that Brexit inevitably brings. Brexit has always been a choice between staying as close to the EU as possible, to protect jobs and prevent a border in Ireland, giving up our say over the rules and getting some kind of free trade agreement, which will inevitably mean more barriers to trade than being a member and seeing a border on the island of Ireland, or leaving the EU with no deal at all, with all the risks and uncertainty that that brings for jobs, businesses and the Good Friday agreement.

If the Prime Minister and the Government will not take the lead in facing up to the three choices and being honest with Members of this House and the public, then Parliament must, and the first step has to be to rule out no deal. Many hon. Members have spoken about the risks of this, but I would just say that for many Members from the east midlands—Members such as me from Leicester—the threats to food and drink manufacturing are real. Some 46,000 jobs depend on food and drink manufacturing, and we know that there could be serious disruption to food supplies and rising business costs and consumer prices if there is no deal.

I will vote for all amendments that seek to rule out no deal, but I believe the most important of these is amendment (b) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). It is the only one that will lead to legislation that requires the Prime Minister to request an extension of article 50, rather than simply urging her to do that through a motion of this House. As my right hon. Friend has said, the House can amend her Bill to specify how long the extension should be. My view, however, is that any extension must be for a purpose, and that purpose is being honest and straightforward with the public about the real choices we face in our long-term relationship with the EU. I urge Members to back that amendment tonight.
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It may be a bit of cliche now, but I say to the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) that the best way to prevent no deal is to vote for a deal. [Interruption.] Well, I am afraid it is pretty obvious.

We have heard so much in this debate about compromise, and we have all had to compromise. This is where I agree with my right hon. Friends the Members for Ashford (Damian Green) and for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). We come to this debate from different directions—I voted to leave in the referendum, and we only won by 52% to 48%—and we cannot get a deal for ourselves that gives us 100% of what we want, so we have to settle for most of what we want.

Frankly, what the Prime Minister has provided us with is leaving the EU, getting control of migration and, after a process of perhaps two or three years, getting out of the customs union. I am not a hard Brexiteer or a soft Brexiteer, but a measured Brexiteer, and that is what the Prime Minister is trying to do. We cannot of course have government by a sub-committee of the 1922 committee. We cannot keep kicking this can down the lane, as we have been told again and again. We have to come to a decision, and probably within the next two weeks we will have to make that final decision.

I say to the Government that I, like so many of my colleagues, will be supporting amendment (n). We want to give the Government some negotiating push to try to resolve this, but we have heard again and again that the EU will not contemplate any amendment to the withdrawal agreement. I say—and I repeat—that there is a solution to this, and we may have to do this in the end if we are going to get this deal through Parliament and reassure in particular our colleagues from Northern Ireland: we may have to issue a letter of reservation, under the Vienna convention, to the treaty. It would say that as may have to issue a letter of reservation, under the Vienna convention, to the treaty. It would say that as both parties agree that the backstop is temporary, if it proves not to be temporary but subsists after 2021, we reserve the right under the Vienna convention to end the backstop and get out of it.

The EU could of course refuse to ratify the treaty, but we do not have to issue the letter of reservation at the time. I believe, however, that if we make absolutely clear our intention that the backstop should be temporary—that is what we have all agreed: the EU has agreed, the DUP has agreed, the Conservative party has agreed, the Labour party has agreed—and we are all agreed, this problem is surmountable. However, the Government must now take action.

I just make one final plea. We talk so much about compromise. At the end of the day, although the Prime Minister is accused of running down the clock, she is doing her level best to deliver what the British people want. So let us finally support her, and let us push this deal over the line.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I rise to speak in favour of amendment (g) and to make the case that the amendment is vital in enabling Parliament to take control, frankly, from a Government who are in denial and in disarray. I must say that I find any opposition to amendment (g) from Conservative Members quite perplexing, given that so many of them were in the forefront of saying that Brexit was all about restoring parliamentary sovereignty. Now it seems as though they regard parliamentary sovereignty as a bit of an inconvenient obstacle to getting their own way.

The amendment is vital to allowing us to avoid the catastrophe of no deal. Let me make it very clear that for my constituents in Brighton no deal would be a catastrophe—a catastrophe for our tourism industry, for businesses, for our universities and research and for families and communities who are built on free movement and will fight to the end to stop free movement ending. The amendment does not bind the House to any particular outcome; it simply gives Parliament the time and space to make an honest assessment of the available options.

I want to say a few words about amendment (n)—the so-called Brady amendment. It takes fantasy to a new art form. I do not know how many times the EU has to say that it is just not possible to re-open negotiation on the withdrawal Bill. The amendment is perhaps an extraordinary way of trying to get the Conservative party to hold together, but it will not stand up to any kind of contact with external reality. Right now, EU officials tell us that they are preparing a statement that says that it would not be possible to open up an agreement that was negotiated over the past 20 months. Sabine Weyand, the deputy chief negotiator, said yesterday: “There’s no negotiation between the UK and EU—that’s finished.”

Crossing one’s fingers, screwing up one’s eyes and just wishing it was otherwise is not a good negotiating strategy.

I appeal to Conservative colleagues to focus on what is in front of us—on practical ways to avoid the catastrophe of no deal, which will hurt the poorest hardest and for which the Prime Minister has absolutely no mandate. To those Conservative Members who seem to think that threatening no deal is effective with our European counterparts, I point out that it is tantamount to someone standing with a pistol to their head and saying, “I’ll fire it if they don’t do what I want.” It is not a very sensible negotiating strategy.

In my last few words, I want to say how much I support amendment (h) on having a citizens’ assembly. If I had more time, I would say more about it.

Mr Speaker: We rue the absence of that further time.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). I again give this caution: we do not seem to be listening in this House. If we continue to say, “This is a Conservative party problem,” we fundamentally misunderstand why people voted for Brexit. We can go on and on about the machinations of the Conservative party and about the party being united, but people in this country, in working-class areas, voted in swathes for Brexit. What were they voting for? I tell the House now that it was not stuff to do with the Conservative party.

We are limited in our options. I was particularly touched by the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). I understand—I can kind of feel—his trepidation about no deal, and absolutely share it; but we cannot get rid of no deal by taking that option away, because without that, we have nothing to fall back on. Should we have done this at the beginning? Yes. Should we have bound Opposition parties into this, and have made this an endeavour of
national renewal? Of course we should, but we are where we are, and we cannot capitulate and let the United Kingdom fall out on a deal that is not good enough.

We have one option left, and that, I am afraid, is to support the Brady amendment. Many of us in this place have said that the Northern Ireland backstop is the problem, so we must now do what the EU keeps saying we cannot do: get behind the Prime Minister and show that we are united on that front. Let us get a result on that backstop agreement—something: a sunset clause, or some sort of unilateral exit—and then let us get on and deliver it. Let us get into the realm of possibility.

I see the exciting new proposals that came forward today; I am pretty lukewarm about them, to be honest, because this has been going on for two years. We have a deal, but there are aspects of it that are not good enough. Let us tackle those aspects, focus on what we are doing and actually deliver Brexit. Let us get this done, so that we can get out of the European Union on 29 March and get on with something else. I have sat through the debate, and it has been extraordinarily painful to hear the arguments rehashed again and again. I have huge respect for those who continue to say, “This or that is going to happen,” and “This or that is what I want,” but we are here now; we are starting now. The agreement has a fundamental flaw that we cannot accept, but let us get on and do something about the backstop that is within the realms of what we can do. If we ask for too much—for the unreasonable—the European Union will shut the door. Let us ask for something deliverable, get that backstop amended, and get out the European Union.

6.30 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): There has been much talk today about finding consensus across the House. The consensus that should trouble us all is the consensus between the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) when they talk about the contempt the British public have for the process they are seeing unfolding before their eyes: the pantomime that we are becoming in Parliament, the questions they have about what on earth is going on in this place and the plague on all our houses that they see.

I have gone through all the amendments and tonight I will support the amendments in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and Labour Front Benchers to try to make some progress. The honest truth, however, is that we have heard many powerful speeches today and there will be little progress.

In the short time available to me, I want to talk about amendment (h). It was not selected, but it speaks to Einstein’s principle that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and again and expecting a different result. We are living through that in this place as we talk but do not listen to each other.

Citizens’ assemblies are not about replacing MPs, or about cancelling or giving up on Parliament. They are not about saying parliamentary democracy cannot work; they are about making it work with the public. They are also about stopping the games that we have seen being played in this place: the horse trading and the unicorn hunting that has meant that we are in this gridlock.

Parliaments around the world have used citizens’ assemblies as a circuit breaker to all the bad habits that now inhabit this place. Everybody here claims to know the will of the people on these issues when the truth is that nobody does, because nobody has actually asked them. It is 250 people randomly selected to represent the British people: not the “Question Time” audience or those who will bother to turn up, but people sorted by their age, ethnicity, gender and social class, excluding politicians and those who work for them. Not aye or no, but looking at the priorities and feeding back into our discussions. We would be free as a Parliament to say no to what they said, but after just 10 short weeks of deliberation we never know what a pair of fresh eyes might bring to this debate. Certainly, that has been the experience in Ireland, Iceland, Canada and Australia. It would equally have left us and remain, Norway, Canada and any other flavour of Brexit.

The Prime Minister was right when she said that nothing has changed, but it can get worse. I ask Members whether they truly think progress can be made in the next 10 weeks, or whether it might just be worth looking at whether there is a better way that we can learn from. The public are watching. They need us to do better. Let us give it a shot.

6.33 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): As colleagues will know, I voted against my party for the first time in my career when I could not support the Prime Minister and the Cabinet’s withdrawal agreement. I felt it breached two very important manifesto commitments, largely around the Northern Ireland protocol, putting barriers in the way of different parts of the United Kingdom and potentially trapping us in an indefinite customs union.

I want to give the Prime Minister the best opportunity to go back to the European Union and secure the changes that are necessary. In my judgment, supporting the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) provides the best opportunity to support the Prime Minister in her return to the European Union.

I do not want to make her task more difficult. That is why I think it is fundamentally wrong to rule out a no-deal Brexit. The best way to secure a Brexit with a deal is to get a deal before this House that can get its support. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said she thought there was some merit in ruling out a no deal to get something in return. The problem is that if this House rules out a no-deal Brexit without the Prime Minister getting something in return, that makes her life more difficult. It makes it more difficult for her to secure a deal and less likely that we will get the deal we need to rule out a no-deal Brexit.

The amendment in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) is flawed for that reason. We have already established that her Bill has a number of problems. I understand that the Labour Front-Bench team is not keen on the length of the delay; her Bill says it would be nine months. I asked her a question and established that the Bill could be used—I accept not by her or my hon. Friend
the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), but by others—as a mechanism for cancelling Brexit, against the wishes of the public. The Bill needs more scrutiny than the one day in which it would be rammed through this House.

I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) that it is perfectly proper for the House to look at its procedures, but if it decides to ram through a piece of contested legislation that has not been agreed to in a procedure usually used for emergency legislation agreed by both Front-Bench teams, I think Back Benchers will rue that precedent, because a future Government will use it to ram through legislation without proper scrutiny. I urge the House to reject amendment (b).

6.36 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I rise to support the SNP amendment that seeks an extension to article 50 and to oppose the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). The most pertinent point that has been made this afternoon in relation to what is being called the Brady amendment is that the backstop is the inevitable consequence of a clash between the Prime Minister’s red lines and our obligations under the Good Friday agreement. Therefore, as the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) said, the Brady amendment is the sort of displacement activity that is engaged in by children who are asked to do something that they do not want to do. I make no apology for repeating that analogy, because it was fantastic.

As I have been sitting here this afternoon listening to Conservative Members waxing lyrical about the Brady amendment, The Guardian correspondent in Brussels and other respected correspondents have reported that the European Union is preparing to issue an immediate rebuttal and publish a statement rejecting any renegotiation of the withdrawal agreement in the event of amendment (n) being passed. Tony Connelly, the very well respected RTE journalist, tells us that Jean-Claude Juncker phoned the Prime Minister at lunch time today to tell her that the Brady amendment is pointless.

Mr Speaker: Order. There are a lot of noisy conversations taking place. The hon. and learned Lady must be heard.

Joanna Cherry: I am sure they do not want to hear it, because it is not convenient. What we have been engaged in today is another waste of time. It is a charade and, frankly, a joke.

Last Friday was the birthday of Robert Burns, who famously said,

“Oh wad some power the giftie gie us
To see ourselves as ithers see us!”

Today, the UK Government and this Parliament are seen as the laughing stock of Europe. A BBC correspondent on the radio this morning said that the other member states are getting the popcorn out, mesmerised by what is going on in this House.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that, as well as being pointless because it will never be agreed, tinkering with the backstop is potentially dangerous? If we gave the backstop its correct description—the Good Friday peace agreement guarantee—tinkering with it would be seen to be as reckless as it actually is.

Joanna Cherry: I entirely agree. I ask myself the following question: what kind of a Prime Minister spends months—years—negotiating a deal, and then supports someone else’s amendment, which drives a coach and horses through it, as the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said? We are in this mess because of the Prime Minister’s red lines and the Conservative and Unionist party’s deceit and foolishness.

Another famous Scottish writer—Walter Scott—once wrote:

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practise to deceive!”

There has been constant deception. First, there was David Cameron’s deception when he called his referendum and thought he could win it with the sort of scare tactics that were employed in Scotland during the independence referendum; then there was the deception employed by the leave campaign, the lies and the undeliverable promises made to ordinary decent people in this country; and now there is the deception of the Prime Minister pretending, so she can hang on to power for a few more days or weeks, that the Brady amendment is her saviour.

The delay provided for in the amendments that seek an extension is not the answer to the mess we are in. The answer for the United Kingdom is a second EU referendum, and the answer for Scotland is a second independence referendum. I believe that very soon Scotland will have to decide whether Scotland wants to be an unequal member of this Union or an equal member of the European Union—a member of a market of 60 million or a member of a single market of 500 million. The answer is a bit of a no-brainer.

6.40 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I have only 10 minutes, so I will get to the heart of the matter. Last Monday, the Prime Minister should have made a substantive and detailed statement setting out how the Government planned to proceed in the face of defeat—a plan B—but she did not. Instead, she has today taken a radically different course and indicated support for an amendment that cuts across the very deal she negotiated by requiring the backstop to be replaced with unspecified “alternative arrangements”. She said earlier it was not the first time the phrase had been used. It has been used twice in these negotiations in different ways: first to mean the future relationship itself and secondly to mean technology. It cannot mean the future relationship, because if we have a future relationship, we do not need a backstop; and if it means technology, it takes us back to the old idea of technology that is not there.

It is one thing for Back Benchers to lay an amendment at odds with the Prime Minister’s deal, but it is quite another for the Prime Minister to support it, unless she has already got an indication from the EU that it could and would negotiate the necessary changes—but she has not. The danger is obvious: that the Prime Minister today may build a temporary sense of unity on her own Benches while in reality raising expectations she can never fulfil.
On 14 January, on the eve of the meaning vote, the Prime Minister said at that Dispatch Box:

“I recognise that some Members wanted to see changes to the withdrawal agreement, a unilateral exit mechanism from the backstop, an end date or rejecting the backstop altogether... The simple truth is that the EU was not prepared to agree to this and rejecting the backstop altogether means no deal.”—[Official Report, 14 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 826.]

Either that was correct, in which case the Government backing this amendment is absurd, or it was not, which raises its own equally serious issues. Earlier when confronted with this, the Prime Minister said you never know if you do not try, which is true, but we have been here before. She told us on 10 December that she was off to seek much lesser concessions, and she failed, so if we are going down the path of giving it a try, we need to consider what happens if we try and fail.

I listened carefully to the Prime Minister when she was challenged by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and she refused to rule out the prospect that she herself would apply for an extension of article 50 if this latest attempt to reopen issues, long thought closed, failed. I do not think this House should be so passive in the face of the high likelihood that we will be back here in two weeks facing that very prospect, which is why Labour will support the amendment seeking to prevent no deal, whether by an extension of article 50 or otherwise.

No deal would be catastrophic for jobs and living standards; it would weaken our security; and it would risk a hard border in Northern Ireland. Members should be under no illusion about this: no deal is not a way to prevent a hard border, but a way to guarantee it.

Mr Nigel Evans: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in a moment.

The first step in preventing the rush to no deal is to reduce the time pressure on the article 50 process. That is what some of the key amendments seek to do, and we will support them, but before there are cries of “Brexit delayed,” let us be clear: we are only at this stage, with 59 days to go, because the Government have run down the clock.

The word crisis is overused in this House, in our media and in our national debate, but we should be in no doubt that this is one of the greatest national crises our country has faced in a generation, and in the absence of leadership from the Government and this Prime Minister, Parliament must now act.

I recognise that there are concerns among some Members, including some on my own side, about voting for these amendments tonight, and I understand those concerns. I also understand the anger and frustration felt by many of our constituents about the handling of these negotiations and about the way in which this place has conducted itself in recent weeks.

Mr Evans rose—

Keir Starmer: However, we do not have the luxury of being bystanders in this debate. We are active participants. What our constituents are looking for is leadership, and it is time for us to provide it. We cannot say that we want to prevent no deal if we are not willing to take steps to stop it. We cannot tell the people that we do not want no deal and then sleepwalk towards it. We must act, and we must act tonight. Our constituents will not forgive us—not should they—if we dodge difficult questions.

Mr Evans: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will not, because I do not want to leave the Secretary of State without the time that he needs.

The next task that the House will have to undertake is to explore credible alternatives to the Prime Minister’s deal that might be capable of gaining majority support in the House. That is not an easy task, but it is one that we need to get on with. Time is now needed in which to debate and vote on these options. That is why Labour’s Front-Bench amendment was tabled, and it is also why Labour supports amendment (g), in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and amendment (f) in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

One of the great tragedies of this last two years is that we have had a Prime Minister who is unwilling to listen to Parliament and wants to push Parliament away, unwilling to build consensus and unwilling to listen to reasonable amendments. But the Prime Minister is now out of time, and Parliament must take control.

6.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Recent weeks have proved the strength and vigour of Parliament, but it is now time to agree its will. It is time for us to establish what deal the House is for, to deliver certainty to our citizens and businesses and to offer clarity to the European Union. As we debate inside the Chamber, we should not lose sight of the fact that outside, the EU rightly expects us to continue to respect our shared values: to protect citizens’ rights, to honour our international obligations and to preserve the integrity of the peace process and avoid a hard border. That is a commitment that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister holds extremely dear.

Indeed, many Members in all parts of the House find much in the withdrawal agreement that is common ground. That is an integral part of bringing the country back together as we move forward in the national interest. However, many of the amendments simply prolong uncertainty and delay, despite the paradox that they were presented in a spirit of making progress in the delivery of certainty.


Ms Angela Eagle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Stephen Barclay: Unlike the shadow Secretary of State, I am happy to give way.

Ms Eagle: I thank the Secretary of State. I wonder whether he could enlighten the House about the phrase in the amendment tabled by the Chairman of the 1922 Committee, the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). What are the “alternative arrangements” that they are going to barrel off to the EU to renegotiate in the next couple of weeks?

Stephen Barclay: If the hon. Lady had read the political declaration, she would know that the alternative arrangements are referred to in paragraph 19, but what she has drawn attention to is the stark difference between Labour and the Conservatives.

The amendment tabled by the Leader of the Opposition has barely been referred to today. Members on his own side did not even want to mention it as they referred to amendments tabled by Back Benchers. They did not seem to want to engage with it. That is because the Leader of the Opposition starts from a position of calling for unity, but cannot adopt the unified position of accepting an amendment from his own Back-Bench colleagues.

Mr Nigel Evans: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Stephen Barclay: I will happily give way.

Mr Evans: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for showing such great generosity in allowing Members to intervene on him. If Members vote for the possibility of extending article 50 this evening by up to nine months and the EU allowed it, has he estimated how many billions of pounds that would cost, and could he estimate where that money would come from—which public services would be damaged because that money was going to Brussels rather than public services in the UK?

Stephen Barclay: The reason we are willing to take interventions and debate is that we have a clear position from the Prime Minister, whereas the position of the Leader of the Opposition is confused. Is he for a second referendum, like the shadow Business Secretary, or does he support the position of the shadow Education Secretary who thinks a second referendum would be a betrayal? Does he or does he not support the position of Len McCluskey, who is willing to engage with the Prime Minister?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The question should be turned the other way: has any estimate been made of the billions in extra revenue that will come to the Exchequer through trading in the best single market and customs union for an extra nine months—not the fee to be part of the club, but the money that is to be gained from trade while being in that club?

Stephen Barclay: The whole point is that indecision and delay would flow from the amendment of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and indeed, as we saw in the debate, there is confusion as to what the date is: the amendment refers to the end of this year, yet in her remarks she said that it might not be that long; she said that it might be shorter. In an exchange, my very good and hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) said that there would be further iterations where we could look at the timing, yet, as my distinguished predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) pointed out, it is an empty vessel—in essence a Trojan horse in which there is indecision over delay.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: I want to make some progress. The key point that flows from the point made by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is that by not backing a deal we prolong the level of uncertainty, and that drives cost. That is exactly why so many businesses in Scotland as well as the rest of the United Kingdom say that the best way to end unnecessary costs under a no deal is to buck the Prime Minister’s deal.

What we see in the debate is a marked difference of focus. We have on the Benches behind me colleagues on different sides of the referendum debate, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), coming together to look at how they can work on solutions, and we have a proposal from my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) that will do just that. It will help us unlock the conversation with the European Union and get us even closer to delivering on the result of the referendum—a result, indeed, that so many on Opposition Members were committed to supporting in their manifesto.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that, whatever we say in this House tonight, those who vote for amendments to delay article 50 and the whole process of leaving at the end of March will be seen by the public, even if they do not mean it, as wanting to stop Brexit?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: at best they delay Parliament in terms of getting clarity on an agreed plan, and at worst they disguise attempts to stop Brexit. It would be better if those Members who want to go back on their manifestos and indeed stop Brexit were more explicit about their intentions, because, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has repeatedly set out, there is only one way to stop no deal and that is to secure a deal or go back on the biggest vote in our democratic history.

In the remaining time, let me turn briefly to the Leader of the Opposition’s amendment because it contradicts what was said by the shadow Trade Secretary who said that a customs policy would give the EU “power to decide our tariffs & quotas with 3rd countries. We’d be forced to liberalise our market but have no reciprocal access to theirs.”

The Leader of the Opposition’s amendment would leave the door open for a second referendum, which is something his own Front-Bench colleagues have said they oppose.

Emma Reynolds: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?
Stephen Barclay: Of course I will give way.

Lady Hermon: I have waited very, very patiently, but I have run out of patience. I would like the Secretary of State to explain to this House exactly what the alternative arrangements are. It is a straightforward question and we are entitled to a straightforward answer.

Stephen Barclay: That will be part of the negotiation that we will discuss in terms of the technical issues. What is not in doubt is that our commitment is shared by the hon. Lady, who has criticised Labour Members who, unlike the sister parties of the Labour movement in Northern Ireland, have not backed this deal or reflected the will of either the Labour movement in the south or that in the north. The fact is that they have walked away from the deal, even though the deal is the way to secure our steadfast commitment, which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister repeated today, to ensuring that no hard border returns to Northern Ireland.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: Given that I have just a minute left, I will not give way.

Across leave and remain constituencies, we hear the same overwhelming call for the House to get on with it. Although 17.4 million people did not vote for no deal, they voted to leave. Time is of the essence. Citizens and business want certainty; the EU wants clarity; the Prime Minister needs a mandate and the House must therefore come together. It is time to act in the national interest. That is why the House should back amendment (n) tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West.

7 pm

The Speaker put the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, this day.)

Amendment proposed: (a), in line 1, leave out from “House” to end and add
“requires ministers to secure sufficient time for the UK Parliament to consider and vote on options to prevent the UK leaving the EU without a ratified Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration, and that those options should include:
(i) Negotiating changes to the draft Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration so as to secure a permanent customs union with the EU, a strong relationship with the single market underpinned by shared institutions and obligations, and dynamic alignment on rights and standards, in order to command a majority in the House of Commons;
(ii) Legislating to hold a public vote on a deal or a proposition that has commanded the support of the majority of the House of Commons.”.—(Jeremy Corbyn.)

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 296, Noes 327.

Division No. 307

[7 pm]

AYES

Abbot, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian

Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Sim
Afoye, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Arlg, Edward
Akins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Keni
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bolsoes, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brckman, Suella
Brelenton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Connor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caiams, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehan
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleveral, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therese
Collins, Damian
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
Din newage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodd, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doye-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncatt, Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evenett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francis, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauge, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Headley, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Holllinake, Kevin
Hollebone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, 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
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lerew, 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
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
McEaffe, 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
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
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
Patterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quine, 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
Runley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scally, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, rh Rosyton
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rory
Division No. 308]

**AYES**

Lake, Ben
Law, Chris
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
McNally, John
McDonald, Stuart Malcolm
Monaghan, Carol
Newlands, Gavin
O’Hara, Brendan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Thewliss, Alison
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete

**TELLERS FOR THE AYES:**

Marion Fellows and David Linden

**NOES**

Allan, Lucy
Allen, Gwladys
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart

**TELLERS FOR THE NOES:**

Wendy Morton and Iain Stewart

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (o), in line 1, leave out from “House” to end and add

“notes that the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and House of Commons all voted overwhelmingly to reject the Prime Minister’s deal; calls for the Government to seek an extension of the period specified under Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union; agrees a No Deal outcome should be ruled out; and recognises that if the UK is an equal partner of nations, the 62 per cent vote to remain at the EU referendum on 23 June 2016 in Scotland should be respected and that the people of Scotland should not be taken out of the EU against their will.”

(Ian Blackford.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 39, Noes 327.
Mundell, David  
Morris, James  
Morgan, Nicky  
Moore, Damien  
Milling, Amanda  
Merriman, Huw  
Mercer, Johnny  
Mak, Alan  
Main, Mrs Anne  
Mak, Alan  
Malthouse, Kit  
Mann, Scott  
Masterton, Paul  
May, rh Mrs Theresa  
Maynard, Paul  
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick  
McPartland, Stephen  
McVey, rh Ms Esther  
Menzies, Mark  
Merron, 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  
Mundell, rh David  
Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
Morrison, Dr Andrew  
Neill, Robert  
Newton, Sarah  
Nokes, rh Caroline  
Norman, Jesse  
O’Brien, Neil  
Ollford, Dr Matthew  
Opperman, Guy  
Paisley, Ian  
Parish, Neil  
Patterson, rh Mr Owen  
Pawsey, Mark  
Penning, rh Sir Mike  
Penrose, John  
Percy, Andrew  
Perry, rh Claire  
Phlip, Chris  
Pincher, rh Christopher  
Poultar, 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, rh Mr Jacob  
Robinson, rh Mr Laurence  
Robinson, Gavin  
Robinson, Mary  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Ross, Douglas  
Rowley, Lee  
Rudd, rh Amber  
Rutley, David  
Sandbach, Antoinette  
Scully, Paul  
Seely, rh Mr Bob  
Selous, Andrew  
Shannon, Jim  
Shapps, rh Grant  
Sharma, Alok  
Shelbrooke, Alec  
Simpson, David  
Simpson, rh Mr Keith  
Skidmore, Chris  
Smith, Chloe  
Smith, Henry  
Smith, rh Julian  
Smith, rh Royston  
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas  
Soubry, rh Anna  
Speelman, rh Dame Caroline  
Spencer, Mark  
Stephenson, Andrew  
Stevenson, John  
Stewart, Bob  
Stewart, Rory  
Streeter, Sir Gary  
Stride, rh Mel  
Stringer, Graham  
Stuart, Graham  
Sturdy, Julian  
Sunak, Rishi  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Swire, rh Sir Hugo  
Syms, 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  
Vara, Mr Shailesh  
Vickers, Martin  
Villiers, rh Theresa  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Walker, Mr Robin  
Wallace, rh Mr Ben  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Watling, Giles  
Whately, Helen  
Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wilson, rh Sammy  
Wood, Mike  
Wragg, Mr William  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim  
Tellers for the Noes:  
Wendy Morton and  
Iain Stewart

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (g), at end, add—

“and orders that on 12 and 26 February and 5, 12, 19 and 26 March 2019—

(a) Standing Order No. 14(1) which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order) shall not apply;—

(b) a Motion in the name of the Chairman of Ways and Means “That this House has considered the United Kingdom’s departure from, and future relationship with, the European Union” shall stand as the first item of business;—

(c) Standing Order No. 24B (Amendments to motions to consider specified matters) shall not apply to such motions;—

(d) proceedings on the motion may continue for up to six and a half hours after its commencement, though opposed, and shall not be interrupted at the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) will not apply; and—

(e) at the conclusion of those proceedings, the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion, which shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker, which may then be moved.”.—[Mr Grieve.]

Question put, That the amendment be made.  

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 321.

Division No. 309] [7.28 pm]  

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allen, Heidi  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Amesbury, Mike  
Antoniasszi, Tania  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Bailey, rh Mr Adrian  
Bardell, Hannah  
Bebb, Guto  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Black, Mhairi  
Blackford, rh Ian  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Boles, Nick  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
Brake, rh Tom  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brock, Deidre  
Brown, Alan  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryant, Chris  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burden, Richard  
Burgen, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cable, rh Sir Vince  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Cameron, Dr Lisa  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Carden, Dan  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Douglas  
Chapman, Jenny  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Cherry, Joanna  
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  
Chwyd, rh Ann  
Coaker, Vernon  
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
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
De Piero, Gloria
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 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
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fletcher, Colleen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glinond, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greening, rh Justine
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holliet, Karen
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan ELan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killeen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leslie, Mr Chris
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Mahotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorran, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Mordden, Jessica
Moran, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Picock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds,/Nathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, rh Geoffrey
Rosda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruanie, Chris
Russell-Mayoie, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulp (Proxy vote cast
by Vicky Foxcroft)
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nic Dakin and
Thangam Debbonaire

NOES
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Besselings, Sir Henry
Bentyn, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, rh Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breer, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Mr Colin
Cleaver, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Rosie
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Cracknell, Caroline
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dowley-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabian, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Finlay, rh Caroline
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
François, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Godsiff, rh Mr Roger
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 Damiano
Griffiths, Andrew
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
Harries, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Graham
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damiano
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsake, Kevin
Hollonbone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kacwczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, John
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherry
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
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Phillip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Priisk, 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
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Laura
Smith, rh Rosalynn
Smell, Garran
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stringer, Graham
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
Toomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Treluyer, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, rh Shaslehs
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, rh Charles
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, rh Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
“and is conscious of the serious risks arising for the United Kingdom from exit without a withdrawal agreement and political declaration and orders accordingly that—

(1) On 5 February 2019—

(a) Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order) shall not apply;

(b) a Business of the House Motion in connection with the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 3) Bill in the name of at least 10 Members, including at least four Members elected to the House as members of at least four different parties and at least two backers of that Bill shall stand as the first item of business;

(c) that motion may be proceeded with until any hour though opposed, shall not be interrupted at the moment of interruption, and, if under discussion when business is postponed, under the provisions of any standing order, may be resumed, though opposed, after the interruption of business; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) will not apply;

(d) at the conclusion of debate on that motion, the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on that motion (including for the purposes of Standing Order No. 36(2) (Questions to be put following closure of debate)) shall include the questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and

(e) the second reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 3) Bill shall stand as the first order of the day; and

(2) In respect of the European Union (Withdrawal) (No. 3) Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.”—(Yvette Cooper.)

**Question put, That the amendment be made.**

**Division No. 310**

[7.42 pm]

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane    |    Brake, rh Tom
Abrahams, Debbie       |    Brennan, Kevin
Ali, Rushanara         |    Brock, Deidre
Allen, Heidi           |    Brown, Alan
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  |    Brown, Lyn
Armesbury, Mike        |    Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Antoniuzzi, Tonia      |    Bryant, Chris
Ashworth, Jonathan     |    Buck, Ms Karen
Bailey, Mr Adrian      |    Burden, Richard
Bardell, Hannah        |    Burgon, Richard
Bebb, Guto             |    Butler, Dawn
Beckett, rh Margaret    |    Byrne, rh Liam
Benn, rh Hilary        |    Cable, rh Sir Vince
Berger, Luciana        |    Cadbury, Ruth
Betts, Mr Clive        |    Cameron, Dr Lisa
Black, Mhairi          |    Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Blackford, rh Ian       |    Carden, Dan
Blackman, Kirsty       |    Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta |    Champion, Sarah
Blomfield, Paul        |    Chapman, Douglas
Boles, Nick            |    Chapman, Jenny
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben    |    Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna         |    Haigh, Louise
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  |    Hamilton, Fabian
Clwyd, rh Ann          |    Hanson, rh David
Coaker, Vernon         |    Hardy, Emma
Coffey, Ann            |    Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Cooper, Julie          |    Harris, Carolyn
Cooper, rh Yvette      |    Haynes, Helen
Corbyn, rh Jeremy      |    Hayman, Sue
Cowan, Ronnie          |    Healey, rh John
Coyle, Neil            |    Hendrick, Sir Mark
Crausby, Sir David     |    Hendry, Drew
Crawley, Angela        |    Hill, Mike
Creagh, Mary           |    Hillier, Meg
Creasy, Stella         |    Hobhouse, Wera
Cruddas, Jon           |    Hodgeth, rh Dame Margaret
Cryer, John            |    Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Cunningham, Alex       |    Hollern, Kate
Cunningham, Mr Jim     |    Hosie, Stewart
Daby, Janet            |    Howarth, rh Mr George
Davey, rh Sir Edward   |    Huq, Dr Rupa
David, Wayne           |    Hussain, Imam
Davies, Geraint        |    Jardine, Christine
Day, Martyn            |    Jarvis, Dan
De Cordova, Marsha     |    Johnson, Diana
Dent Cooad, Emma       |    Jones, Darren
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh |    Jones, Gerald
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  |    Jones, Graham P.
Docherty-Hughes, Martin |    Jones, Helen
Dodds, Anneliese       |    Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Doughty, Stephen       |    Jones, Sarah
Dowd, Peter            |    Jones, Susan Elan
Drew, Dr David         |    Keeley, Barbara
Dromey, Jack           |    Kendall, Liz
Duffield, Rosie        |    Khan, Afzal
Eagle, Ma Angela       |    Killen, Ged
Eagle, Maria           |    Kinnock, Stephen
Edwards, Jonathan      |    Kyle, Peter
Efford, Clive          |    Laird, Lesley
Elliott, Julie         |    Lake, Ben
Ellman, Dame Louise    |    Lamb, rh Norman
Elmore, Chris          |    Lammy, rh Mr David
Esterson, Bill         |    Lavery, Ian
Evans, Chris           |    Law, Chris
Farrelly, Paul         |    Lee, Karen
Farron, Tim            |    Lee, Dr Phillip
Fellows, Marion        |    Leslie, Mr Chris
Fletcher, Colleen      |    Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Foxcroft, Vicky        |    Lewis, Clive
Freeman, George        |    Lewis, Mr Ivan
Frith, James           |    Linden, David
Furniss, Gill          |    Lloyd, Stephen
Gaffney, Hugh          |    Lloyd, Tony
Gapes, Mike            |    Long Bailey, Rebecca
Gardiner, Barry        |    Lucas, Caroline
George, Ruth           |    Lucas, Ian C.
Gethins, Stephen       |    Lynch, Holly
Gibbon, Patricia       |    MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Gill, Preet Kaur       |    Madders, Justin
Glindon, Mary          |    Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Goodman, Helen         |    Mahmood, Shabana
Grady, Patrick         |    Malhotra, Seema
Grant, Peter           |    Marsden, Gordon
Gray, Neil             |    Martin, Sandy
Green, Kate            |    Maskell, Rachael
Greening, rh Justine   |    Matheson, Christian
Greenwood, Lilian      |    Mc Nally, John
Greenwood, Margaret    |    McCabe, Steve
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic  |    McCarty, Kerry
Griffith, Nia          |    McDonagh, Siobhain
Grogan, John           |    McDonald, Andy
Gwynne, Andrew         |    McDonald, David
Gyimah, Mr Sam         |    McDonald, Stewart Malcolm

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Wendy Morton and Iain Stewart
29 JANUARY 2019

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

Proxies

Bacon, Mr Richard
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onurrah, Chikez
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Elise
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Howe, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherrard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breer, Mark
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshore, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burlhart, Alex
Burns, Connor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Cartwright, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Alun
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clewer, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Rosie
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Donachie, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doye, 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
Evans, rh Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frasier, Lucy
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Godsiff, Mr Roger
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
Griffiths, Andrew
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
Heburn, rh Mr Stephen
Herbert, rh Nick
Herm, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoa, Lauren
Hoe, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollovere, rh Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenney, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nic Dakin and
Thangam Debbonaire

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Sim
Ali, Adam
Aldey, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bakewell, Tony
Barron, Mr John
Barroso, rh Sir Kevin
Barnett, Sir Graham
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brander, Mr Edward
Braver, rh Sir John
Bratton, David
Brienza, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshore, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burlhart, Alex
Burns, Connor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Cartwright, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Alun
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clewer, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Rosie
Cuoff, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Donachie, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doye, 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
Evans, rh Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frasier, Lucy
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Godsiff, Mr Roger
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
Griffiths, Andrew
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
Heburn, rh Mr Stephen
Herbert, rh Nick
Herm, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoa, Lauren
Hoe, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollovere, rh Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenney, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Amendment proposed: (j), at end, add “and, in the event that the House of Commons has not passed a resolution approving the negotiated withdrawal agreement and the framework for the future relationship for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 by 26 February 2019, requires the Prime Minister to seek an extension to the period of two years specified in Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union.”.—(Rachel Reeves.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 290, Noes 322.

Division No. 311] 

AYES

7.56 pm

Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowen, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddock, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dochner-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Dougherty, 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
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Fletcher, Colleen
Foxcroft, Vicki
Froth, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh

Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Wendy Morton and
Iain Stewart

Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh 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
Robertson, rh Sir Andrew
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Ailec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Laura
Smith, Royston
Snell, Gareth
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Steward, Bob
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tilbury, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warren, David
Warren, Matt
Watling, Giles

Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy

773 774

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

Division No. 311]

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018
Tellers for the Ayes: Nic Dakin and Thangam Debbonaire

NOES

Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rgh Greg
Clarke, Sir Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Rosie
Courts, Robert
Cox, rgh Mr Geoffrey
Crab, rgh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Dockery, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jack
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rgh Sir Alan
Duncan, Mr Thomas
Dunne, rh Mr Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wyllastone, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greening, rh Justine
Greenwood, Margaret
Greenwood, Lilian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rgh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leslie, Mr Chris
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tom
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Marsell, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rgh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Connor
McGovern, Alison
Mclnnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, lan
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morgan, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Murray, lan
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
O'Mara, Jared
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip, (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cath
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thewlis, Alison
Thomas, Geoffrey
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Adams, Nigel
Afzali, Bim
Afriyie, Adda
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, lan
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breereton, Jack
Brighouse, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenbrow, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Allasanzin
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wyllastone, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (i), at end, add

Amendment rejected.

The House divided: Ayes 318, Noes 310.

**Division No. 312**

**AYES**

Abott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ali, Rushanara  
Alli, Heidi  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Amesbury, Mike  
Antoniuzzi, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  

**NOES**

Spelman, rh Dame Caroline  
Spencer, Mark  
Stephenson, Andrew  
Stevenson, John  
Stewart, Bob  
Stewart, Rory  
Streeter, Sir Gary  
Stride, rh Mel  
Stringer, Graham  
Stuart, Graham  
Sturdy, Julian  
Sunak, Rishi  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Swire, rh Sir Hugo  
Syms, Sir Robert  
Thomas, Derek  
Thomson, Ross  
Throup, Maggie  
Tohurhes, Kelly  
Tomlinson, Justin  
Tomlinson, Michael  
Tracey, Craig  
Tredinnick, David  
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie  
Truss, rh Elizabeth  
Tugendhat, Tom  
Vara, Mr Shailesh  
Vickers, Martin  
Villiers, rh Theresa  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Walker, rh Mr Robin  
Wallace, rh Mr Ben  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Watling, Giles  
Whatley, Helen  
Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggins, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wilson, rh Mr Sammy  
Wood, Mike  
Wragg, Mr William  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
Wendy Morton and Iain Stewart
NOES

Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Docheiry, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Derries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudige, 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
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francis, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillian, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Halle, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
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 Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kiwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVeY, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metsaffe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
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
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritik, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Wil
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhostyn
Amendment proposed: (n), at end, add “and requires the Northern Ireland backstop to be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border; supports leaving the European Union with a deal and would therefore support the Withdrawal Agreement subject to this change.”—(Sir Graham Brady.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 317, Noes 301.

Division No. 313

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afroimi, Bim
Alnryie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harrietted
Barclay, rhp Stephen
Baron, rhp John
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bolles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Mr Shafeesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Wathan, Mark
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rhp Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Drories, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyles-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
Ephicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Simon
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Fraser, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Givvan, Paul
Glen, John
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goldsmithe, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, rh Sir Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Hafon, 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 Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick

Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoe, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollowbone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Mr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lloyd, Stephen
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Macleane, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Mathhouse, Kit
Mann, John
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milking, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<td>Benn, Hilary</td>
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<td>Buck, Ms Karen</td>
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<td>Dryer, John</td>
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Resolved,

That this House, in accordance with the provisions of section 13(6)(a) and 13(11)(b)(i) and 13(13)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, has considered the Written Statement titled “Statement under Section 13(4) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018” and made on 21 January 2019, and the Written Statement titled “Statement under Section 13(11)(a) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018” and made on 24 January 2019; and rejects the United Kingdom leaving the European Union without a Withdrawal Agreement and a Framework for the Future Relationship; and requires the Northern Ireland backstop to be replaced with alternative arrangements to avoid a hard border; supports leaving the European Union with a deal and would therefore support the Withdrawal Agreement subject to this change.

The Prime Minister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A fortnight ago, this House clearly rejected the proposed withdrawal agreement and political declaration, with just 202 Members voting in favour. Tonight, a majority of hon. Members have said that they would support a deal with changes to the backstop combined with measures to address concerns over Parliament’s role in the negotiation of the future relationship and commitments on workers’ rights in law where need be. It is now clear that there is a route that can secure a substantial and sustainable future partnership.

As I said this afternoon, there is limited appetite for such a change in the EU and negotiating it will not be easy, but by contrast to a fortnight ago, this House has made it clear what it needs to approve a withdrawal agreement. Many hon. Members have said that the continued continuation of workers’ rights after Brexit is something that needs to be strengthened. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will intensify our work with hon. Members from across the House and the Government will now redouble their efforts to get a deal that this House can support. To that end, I want to invite my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary to intensify our work with hon. Members from across the House and the Government will now redouble their efforts to get a deal that this House can support.

As well as making clear what changes it needs to approve the withdrawal agreement, the House has also reconfirmed its view that it does not want to leave the EU without a withdrawal agreement and future framework. I agree that we should not leave without a deal. However, simply opposing no deal is not enough to stop it. The Government will now redouble their efforts to get a deal that this House can support. To that end, I want to invite my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary to intensify our work with hon. Members from across the House and the Government will now redouble their efforts to get a deal that this House can support. To that end, I want to invite my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary to intensify our work with hon. Members from across the House and the Government will now redouble their efforts to get a deal that this House can support.

In the light of the defeat of the amendment of the Leader of the Opposition, I again invite him to take up discussion how we can deliver that by securing a deal.

Tellers for the Noes: Thangam Debbonaire and Nic Dakin
Jeremy Corbyn: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Since we have had this debate and the House has emphatically voted to reject the no-deal option that the Prime Minister was supporting, may I say that we are prepared to meet her to put forward the Labour party’s points of view about the kind of agreement we want with the European Union in order to protect jobs, living standards and rights and conditions in this country? It is exactly the offer that was made last September and exactly the offer that was made two weeks ago. I look forward to meeting the Prime Minister to set out those views to her on behalf of my party.

Ian Blackford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This House has spoken—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is the leader of the third party in this place and represents an important body of opinion. As was exhorted earlier, people should treat opinions that differ from their own with respect. The right hon. Gentleman will be heard, however long it takes. That is all there is to it.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The House this evening has given an instruction to the Government that no deal must be taken off the table. I am frankly flabbergasted that the Prime Minister still seems to be in denial. What legislation will she bring forward to ensure that we remove the threat of no deal?

This is a sad day, when the Prime Minister has had to admit that her deal does not have support and that she is now prepared to try to pick a way at the backstop. We were told that the backstop was there to protect the peace process, but tonight the Conservative party has effectively ripped apart the Good Friday agreement. This House should be ashamed of itself. The contempt shown by the United Kingdom Government right across these islands is stark.

This Government, Westminster and the Tory party have no respect for the devolved Administrations or the other regions of the United Kingdom. Scotland has been silenced, sidelined and shafted by the Tories. Tonight the Conservative party has effectively ripped apart the Good Friday agreement—an international treaty. This is serious; we are talking about a treaty that has delivered peace to the island of Ireland. The Government have reneged on the backstop and on the Good Friday agreement. Mr Speaker, can you advise what mechanisms are open to this House to protect the democratic rights of the devolved regions and nations, as well as the Good Friday agreement and the peace process that this Government are prepared to disregard?

Mr Speaker: I will take the right hon. Gentleman’s question as a rhetorical question, rather than a substantive one. He knows that Parliament is here to debate and to vote, and he is well familiar—[Interruption.] Order. I am addressing the right hon. Gentleman; perhaps he would do me the courtesy of listening to me. He has the mechanisms of the House available to him.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Yes, I will take other points of order briefly.

Sir Vince Cable: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Now that the House has given the Prime Minister contradictory instructions—not to have no deal, but to pursue a course of action that will lead to no deal—will she return to the House tomorrow and give a clearer indication of what these alternative arrangements actually are? They have been rejected at her own summit at Chequers and now appear to be the basis of negotiations.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, but I would say to him—I know that he will take this in the right spirit—that this is not Prime Minister’s questions. Prime Minister’s questions will take place tomorrow. If I understand correctly, I think the right hon. Gentleman was more concerned to make his point than to elicit a reply from the Prime Minister, and there is no reason for the Prime Minister to feel any need to reply tonight. The right hon. Gentleman has made his point and there will be ample opportunity for further exchanges, doubtless tomorrow and in many subsequent days.

Nigel Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We represent 10 seats in Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) represents one other, and there are others who represent a different point of view but who refuse to take their seats in this House, and it is quite frankly outrageous—I am, I believe, speaking on behalf of both communities in Northern Ireland—to say that this vote tonight drives a coach and horses through the Good Friday agreement. It does nothing of the sort. It is utterly reckless to talk in those terms—utterly reckless. The fact of the matter is that nobody in Northern Ireland—no political party—is advocating any kind of hard border in the island of Ireland, and we certainly do not advocate what others advocate, which is creating borders within the United Kingdom or ripping up the United Kingdom. Let me say in conclusion that this is a significant night because, for the first time, the House, by a majority, has expressed a view on the sort of deal that will get through and will have a majority. We will work with the Prime Minister to deliver the right deal for the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order.

Liz Saville Roberts: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When the woman holding the title of Prime Minister is driven solely by the ideal of holding the Tory party together, and the man known as the Leader of the Opposition will neither lead nor oppose, how do you advise that we get the House back to working for the communities we are supposed to represent?

Mr Speaker: Again, if I may very politely say so, I think the hon. Lady’s point of order, although it contains what is ostensibly an inquiry, is one in which she is making her point rather than seeking anything from me. The short answer to her is that, as I said a moment ago, there will be further debate. Members must speak and vote as they think fit. All these matters will be thoroughly aired in the days and weeks to come, and I am sure we all look forward to that—the hon. Lady from her vantage point and I from mine.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I hope you can advise. The House seems to have found itself in a contradictory position. First, it wants no deal off the table; and secondly, it does not
accept the deal that the European Union is putting forward. Is it not the case that the United Kingdom Parliament is now at the mercy of the European Union, because if we are in a situation where no deal is off the table and we are not accepting the deal the EU is offering, where do we go from here?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman may wish to offer the views that he has just expressed to the news outlets that operate in Na h-Eileanan an Iar, and I rather suspect that that is what he will want to do. Local newspapers and radio stations will doubtless be very interested in the views that he wishes to express, but they are not matters of which I can treat now. The House has decided what it has decided—[Interjection.]

The hon. Gentleman is saying that these matters are in contradiction of each other or have to be weighed against each other, but of course it is not a matter for the Chair to offer an exegesis to the House on the way in which it has voted. Members will make their own assessment. We know what statute says and we know what expressions of opinion have been recorded by the House today. The hon. Gentleman, although his brow is furrowed, is a perspicacious fellow, and I am sure he will get his head around these matters in the hours, days and weeks to come. We look forward to that with eager anticipation.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AGRICULTURE)

That the draft Floods and Water (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 5 December 2018, be approved.—[Jo Churchill.]

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 30 January (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION)

That the draft Environment (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 5 December 2018, be approved.—[Jo Churchill.]

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CIVIL AVIATION)

That the draft Airports Slot Allocation (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 10 December 2018, be approved.—[Jo Churchill.]

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

PETITION

Levels of pay in Further Education

8.55 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of more than 500 students and staff from Darlington College in my constituency who are demanding fair funding for further education.

Colleges build communities. They help young people to fulfil their potential, discover new talents and realise their ambitions. Colleges drive social mobility. They are the heart of local economic growth and provide the workforce needed for local businesses to thrive. For many, they are a springboard towards a bright and prosperous future, but a recent calculation by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that spending on further education has been cut in real terms by more than £3 billion since 2010-11. Because of that, we now see fewer teaching hours, cuts to student support and stagnant wages for teachers and support staff. That harms outcomes for students, reduces opportunities and is bad for my whole community. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to “provide fair funding for further education and fair pay for college staff” in the interests of student performance, educational outcomes and community prosperity.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that while participation in full-time education has more than doubled over the past 30 years, it is reported that spending per student in further education is 8% lower than in secondary schools; further that colleges over the last decade have dealt with an average 30% cut in funding as costs continue to increase; further that this has resulted in a drastic drop in learning opportunities available to students; fewer teaching hours and support for young people, and staff pay; further that the situation is not sustainable and ultimately impacts on student performance; further that 547 staff and students from Darlington College have signed a similar petition to the petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to provide fair funding for further education and fair pay for college staff that operate in Na h-Eileanan an Iar, and I rather suspect that that is what he will want to do. Local newspapers and radio stations will doubtless be very interested in the views that he wishes to express, but they are not matters of which I can treat now. The House has decided what it has decided—[Interjection.]

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

8.56 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am grateful to the House for allowing me to raise the issue of the Vagrancy Act 1824 on this of all evenings, when others out there might be forgiven for thinking that we do nothing other than talk about Brexit.

I have been campaigning to repeal the Vagrancy Act for well over a year now. In fact, my campaign began in response to a petition by the Oxford University Student Union and Oxford-based homelessness campaign group On Your Doorstep. I want to give them full credit for starting this.

The Vagrancy Act is a cruel and outdated piece of legislation. It was aimed at tackling the rise in homeless veterans after the Napoleonic wars, and even then it was controversial, with the great abolitionist William Wilberforce suggesting that it was too catch-all because it did not consider people’s individual circumstances. Nearly 200 years later, it is still used to criminalise people for sleeping rough or begging.

Between 2014 and 2016, more than 3,000 homeless people were dragged before the courts in violation of the Vagrancy Act. That is only the tip of the iceberg, as many more individuals will have been arrested but had their cases dropped, or the Act will have been used as a threat to move them on.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. This issue affects us all. Just last week in my constituency, I had to deal with a homeless person in great need. Does she agree that the use of this law to target people who are sleeping on the streets or begging should be stopped, and instead councils should work with compassion and care to help people who are desperate and find a way to make our social care system work for that individual, as opposed to simply moving them on, as helpless and hopeless as they were before? Compassion and care—that is what we need in society.

Layla Moran: The words “compassion and care” will repeat themselves in what I have to say tonight, and I could not more agree with the hon. Gentleman. The signal that this sends to others about who we are as a society is why I believe this Act needs to be repealed as a matter of urgency.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): The hon. Lady is quite right to refer to William Wilberforce. He acknowledged at the time that the Act did nothing to take into account personal situations and the reasons behind homelessness. As she said, his words ring true two centuries later. Does she agree with me, and I think with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), that in a modern society it is far more effective and compassionate to use time and resources to help those who desperately need that support, rather than relying on this blunt piece of legislation on the statute book, which, as Wilberforce pointed out, does nothing to help those living on the streets and simply criminalises the vulnerable?

Layla Moran: I could not agree more with every word the hon. Lady said. Indeed, if we want an example of how badly the Vagrancy Act can be used, last year Windsor Council suggested, just before the royal wedding, that local police use the Act to “clean up the streets”. That was a disgraceful display, but, unfortunately, it is not uncommon. The Act is a common tool that is available to the police across the country.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this very pressing issue to the House. Does she not agree that it is particularly cruel, given that a lot of homeless people are actually ex-military men who have devoted their lives and given their commitment to this country? They are on the streets for various reasons, but we should treat them in a very different way, rather than punishing them when they were originally prepared to give their lives for this country.

Layla Moran: In fact, this comes back to why the Act was controversial 200 years ago, let alone now. The use of the Act is damaging and counterproductive in tackling rough sleeping. Rather than addressing the root causes of homelessness, which we all know are incredibly complex, the Act simply displaces people from one area to another, which is particularly problematic given that the funding of support is still to an extent based on local connection.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I give way to my constituency neighbour.

Layla Moran: I give way to my constituency neighbour.

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Lady is making an excellent case, and I am very pleased that it is one that my party supports as well. When I have had discussions with rough sleepers—at the new hub, O’Hanlon House, the Porch, the Gatehouse or, indeed, doing a St Mungo’s round—in every case those discussions showed that people really need the support she is talking about, rather than to be criminalised, which can of course set them back substantially. Does she agree?

Layla Moran: I completely agree. Indeed, we know very well from our city how much our local constituents care desperately, and care and compassion, as has been mentioned, is actually the driving force behind why people care so deeply about this matter. The legislation acts as a barrier to cultural change. It sends a message that the act of rough sleeping itself is morally wrong, and it treats people who are sleeping rough as a negative problem to solve, rather than individuals in need of positive support.

In 2018, I met the Leader of the House on this matter, and asked if she could help me to repeal the Act. She was sympathetic, but she told me that some homelessness stakeholders wanted to keep the Act in place. This was reaffirmed by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), who is the Minister for homelessness, when we met last year. However, in my second meeting about this with Ministers, I got positive engagement. I am disappointed that the Minister for homelessness is not on the Front Bench today, because I am going to answer some of the questions she raised in the meeting. However, she made the point that the Act was used to encourage rough sleepers to get off the streets and into shelters.
[Layla Moran]

I listened carefully to those arguments, and I continue to disagree with them. The thing is that threatening rough sleepers with the Vagrancy Act to coerce them into shelters is not the way to help them. It is paternalistic and it claims that it is for their own good, but it actually has the opposite effect. In a survey of people sleeping rough carried out by Crisis, 56% said that enforcement measures such as the Vagrancy Act contributed to their feeling ashamed of being homeless, and 25% said that following an enforcement intervention their alcohol consumption increased. What does that say about the effect of the Act on the human level?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does not the hon. Lady agree that many homeless people have nowhere else to go during the day, and they are therefore just moved on time and again? The only solution is to ensure that people have secure housing, and the Government target nine years from now is quite frankly, far too late.

Layla Moran: The hon. Lady is exactly right. Using the Act just moves the problem on; often, it does not tackle the core issues behind what is happening.

This is my first question—of many, as the Minister will not be surprised to hear. Who are these stakeholders who wish to keep the Act in place? I would be genuinely grateful for a response, because they certainly do not include the homelessness charities with which I have been working, or the outreach managers whom St Mungo’s surveyed in 2018; 71% of them believed that the Act should be scrapped. One said:

“The Vagrancy Act takes a moral view on street activity giving no consideration to the complex reasons behind any such activity such as begging and rough sleeping. It is widely agreed that criminalizing addicts and homeless people serves no purpose apart from to further push them to the fringes of society, towards further impoverishment and stigmatization. I agree it should be scrapped”.

Surely we should listen to the views of professionals, who see at first hand the Act’s damaging impact on rough sleepers.

When we met last year, the Minister for homelessness argued that she does not want to criminalise homeless people—I believe her—but that she supports the use of the Vagrancy Act to combat “aggressive and persistent begging”. I went away and did my homework, just as I, like a good teacher, would have told my students to. Legal advice to Crisis concluded that the actions criminalised by the Vagrancy Act are covered by many other provisions in criminal law:

“Much of the language is archaic. The conduct it seeks to criminalise appears to belong to a different era. Legislation other than the Vagrancy Act, if correctly and carefully applied, provides a much better and modern framework than what remains of the Act”.

The Public Order Act 1986 and the Fraud Act 2006 are good examples of legislation that could and should combat aggressive begging. Indeed, in a debate in Westminster Hall, the Minister for homelessness acknowledged that “Local authorities and police are equipped with a wide range of enforcement powers to combat issues arising from begging. Particularly flexible are the powers contained in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014”—[Official Report, 17 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 386WH.]

If there is other legislation in place, why is the Vagrancy Act needed at all?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The hon. Lady is doing an excellent job. I ask this so that I can respond to the debate properly. She made the point that criminalising people who are homeless or begging damages the ability to help them. She went on to say that other Acts may also criminalise them and that they should or could be used instead of the Vagrancy Act. Is there a contradiction in that statement? Would she like to clarify that, just to enable me to respond more fully?

Layla Moran: I will come to that later, when I will ask the Minister to extend the review that his Department is carrying out of this legislation to include all that other legislation, but I would point out that the Acts I mentioned are about aggressive begging, which is different, of course, from being genuinely homeless; we need to make sure that the two are not conflated.

In some parts of the country, the Vagrancy Act is not used at all. Chief constables can decide to use the Act at their discretion, and it is used in only 34% of the country. Why does it not have to be used in 66% of the country, and why is it used in 34% of it? Furthermore, use is planned to decrease to 7% of areas. Is the aim to shut this door? However, the Act is still there, though it has been repealed in Northern Ireland and Scotland. If it is barely being used, why not just repeal it?

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The Act was repealed in Scotland in 1982. Every night, when I go from a full House here to my flat, I pass six homeless people while crossing the bridge to St Thomas’s Hospital. A young girl—18 years old—arrived there last night. She was sitting on the bridge with a bag. I did not know how to approach her, or what to do. That is happening here, and there have already been two deaths outside this House. We have to look at the Vagrancy Act, and I applaud the hon. Lady for bringing the subject to the House.

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. His passion is palpable. This measure is receiving wide cross-party support in the House and I would like to take a moment to thank all hon. Members for being here for the debate. It means so much to the community.

I was very pleased to hear that a review is on the cards. I speak to homelessness charities and they are a little frustrated that there has been no announcement on when it will take place. That is important, but I do ask why we need one at all when the situation is blindingly obvious. I encourage the Minister to widen the scope and ambition of the review. There should be a wider assessment of enforcement, for example on the use of public space protection orders and dispersal orders that give the police and local authorities the power to penalise the act of rough sleeping itself. We need a cool-headed assessment of whether that actually helps the people we seek to help. I believe that the Government want to help, but I wonder if the stick approach now needs to be changed.
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Lady agree that measures such as the Vagrancy Act not only criminalise homeless people, but put into the mind of the public that they are criminals and, as a result, they receive worse treatment? In Brighton, one homeless person was murdered last year and many others are regularly attacked. Removing the Act would show that it is not acceptable to treat people who have ended up in dire circumstances in that way.

Layla Moran: I agree entirely. The principle of no enforcement without support is vital. As funding for local authorities has decreased, there is often not enough money to tackle the root causes and to give the support to those who are at risk of homelessness or who are homeless. Rather than spending money enforcing laws that punish people and move them on, in the long term it would be a far better use of taxpayers’ money to invest properly in the very welcome Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which I have no doubt the Minister will mention, and to ensure support is in place to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place.

We all know that the causes of homelessness are complex. The Government need to do more to support local councils in providing services to combat those root causes. The Homelessness Reduction Act is a welcome start, but it cannot be the end. It is clear that the Vagrancy Act, among other Acts, is the lowest hanging fruit—it just makes problems worse. We need a more compassionate and preventive approach to tackling the national scandal of homelessness.

Repealing the Vagrancy Act would be an easy first step. It would not take any money, just a three-line Bill. The private Member’s Bill is waiting there and I am desperate for it to receive support. I think it would receive support from all corners of the House. I am sorry to say—this is the way with private Members’ Bills—that it was blocked on First Reading. However, we are seeking another First Reading soon. I am delighted that the Labour party is now supporting the Bill—that is brilliant—as are St Mungo’s, Centrepoint and Crisis. There is a real swell in the campaign from across the political spectrum and beyond.

The Vagrancy Act is a symbol: what sort of country do we want to be? Rather than being a cold-hearted mean-spirited country, I believe we should show compassion and care to those who need our help. I ask the Minister to push as hard as he possibly can at the open door to scrap the Vagrancy Act.

9.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): This is the first time I have heard the hon. Lady talk on this subject in the House. I congratulate her on the tone of the debate and on how heartfelt and passionate she is on this very, very important subject. I congratulate her, too, on securing tonight’s debate.

I want to live in a country—I think we all do—where no one should ever have to sleep rough. That is why the Government have committed to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027. When I first entered Parliament in 2010, before I did this job as a Minister, I worked for the then Housing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps). We worked together then, as part of the coalition Government, on how we could come together across government, and I think also on a cross-party basis, to tackle the scourge of homelessness. That is why I am pleased that the Government published our rough sleeping strategy in August 2018, which set out, as I think has been acknowledged across the sector, an ambitious programme building on three core pillars. Before I answer the hon. Lady’s questions, I want to expand on them briefly to help us all understand the context of the debate.

First, we want to prevent rough sleeping before it happens. That is hugely important and is our key target. We then want to intervene at crisis point, again to try to prevent rough sleeping from ever occurring. For people who find themselves rough sleeping, we need flexible support that meets their needs and enables them to leave the streets. That is why we committed £1.2 billion of funding over the spending review period to tackle homelessness. We implemented the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—the hon. Lady correctly said that I would mention it—to put prevention, which is key, absolutely at the heart of our approach to tackling homelessness.

We must ensure that people get early support to prevent them from ever becoming homeless, and we must provide support on a broader basis than ever before to help people off the streets. We have started to do that through the introduction of pilots such as Housing First, the rapid rehousing pathway and the private rented sector access fund to help people leave the streets and find a sustainable stay in accommodation.

On the hon. Lady’s main point, the Government are clear that no one should be criminalised in this country for having nowhere to sleep. That is quite wrong, and we are determined to tackle it. We have made it clear in the guidance that public space protection orders should not be used to target people who are simply sleeping rough or are homeless. Rough sleeping on its own does not have, or is very unlikely to have, an unreasonable detrimental impact on a neighbourhood, and therefore those orders should not be used. On the point that the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) made about the real price of homelessness that we see every night in London, we all understand that we should not target or criminalise people who are simply homeless or sleeping rough.

People are convicted every year under sections 3 and 4 of the 1824 Act, to which the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon referred, but we have seen that they are used to target persistent begging and public order offences in public places. [Interruption.]

The hon. Lady is shaking her head, but that is what our rough sleeping advisory panel’s research shows. She asked who is on the advisory panel. That information is publicly available. It includes Crisis, Shelter, St Mungo’s, Homeless Link, the Local Government Association and others.

Layla Moran: For clarification, I asked which stakeholders agree that the Vagrancy Act can be used. At least three of the charities that the Minister mentions have said to me that they do not, so who wants it to be used? As he can see, I am listening, and I want to understand who wants this and why, so that I can get to the bottom of it. Who are they?

Jake Berry: If the hon. Lady would allow me to develop my argument, I will attempt to answer her question.
Of course, other legislation is used. The hon. Lady mentioned the Public Order Act 1986 and the Offences Against the Person Act 1861—another very old piece of legislation that makes persistent begging in public places an arrestable offence. She asked why laws other than the Vagrancy Act are not used. It is because they have a higher burden of proof and harsher penalties are often—although not always—attached to them than to the Vagrancy Act.

Tracey Crouch: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his tone. I have known him for nearly nine years, and I know that he cares passionately about homelessness and rough sleeping. On the panel, he mentioned various stakeholders, but one that he did not mention is the police. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said that many police forces do not use the Vagrancy Act. A police officer who works in the town centres in Medway told me that he has never used it; he always uses community protection notices. What input is the panel getting from those who actually apply the legislation—in other words, the police?

Jake Berry: I am coming to our review of the law, but it is heavily engaging the Home Office and thereby the police and law enforcement more generally.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Berry: I do not want to be timed out, so this will be the last time I give way.

Wera Hobhouse: From the list the Minister is reading out, I get the strong feeling that local authorities have also been involved. Could he clarify with the LGA where it stands on this?

Jake Berry: I will happily go away and find out the LGA’s position, although, having been involved in such commissions myself, I can say there is often robust debate as they come to their conclusions, but many people with differing views happily come behind one report and one set of recommendations, so the LGA will not necessarily have had the ability to set out its view separately, but will have been bound as part of the panel.

As I have said on the record, the Government do not believe that anyone should be criminalised for simply sleeping rough, but equally we should not rush to a wholesale repeal of the 1824 Act without proper consideration of the consequences. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon said—I wrote it down—that we needed a cool-headed assessment of the law before acting. I agree, and I rather hope she accepts that that is the Government’s approach.

We developed our rough sleeping strategy in collaboration with many national charities, many of which I have named, and they form part of the rough sleeping advisory panel. Enforcement can form part of moving some people away from the streets, but it should come with an offer of meaningful support. Some charities working with rough sleepers are clear that the ability to secure income through begging can make it harder, not easier, for vulnerable people to leave their damaging lifestyles behind. The 1824 Act is sometimes the only option to get someone off the street when they have become dependent on begging income to support their drug or alcohol dependency and to find ways of moving towards the support they need.

The rough sleeping strategy made a commitment—partially based, I am sure, on the hon. Lady’s sterling work—to extend our review of the Homelessness Reduction Act to include a review of other relevant homelessness and rough-sleeping legislation, including, of course, the 1824 Act. She acknowledged that homelessness and rough sleeping was a complex issue, and we know from engagement with stakeholders that there are conflicting views about the necessity and importance of the 1824 Act, which is why the Government believe that a review, rather than immediate action, which I know she would prefer, is the appropriate course of action.

We recognise that there is a wide variety of views about the Act among stakeholders. We have engaged with homelessness charities, such as those referenced by the hon. Lady, and the panel held wide-ranging views, although many panel members thought the Act necessary. My Department will continue to work with the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the homelessness sector to understand why the Act is used as part of this wider review, and one thing we want to get to the bottom of is why it is used to varying extents in different areas. Before we rush to repeal it, we must understand why that is the case. We will report the review findings by March 2020.

There is obviously considerable interest in this debate, and I would like to make an open offer to all interested hon. Members. I know the hon. Lady met my hon. Friend the homelessness Minister, and she is more than welcome to do so again. As part of this review of the law, we want to seek as many views as possible in order to get it right, so the door to my Department remains open, and I know that my hon. Friend, too, will happily meet colleagues from across the House to make sure we get this right, because it is very, very important. We must act to help the most vulnerable in society.

Question put and agreed to.

9.24 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 30 January 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Border: Use of Technology

1. Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): What assessment she has made of the feasibility of using technology to avoid a hard border in the island of Ireland; and if she will make a statement.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): Today marks the tragic anniversary of the events of 30 January 1972, a day more commonly known as Bloody Sunday. I am sure the entire House will want to join me in marking this day, and our thoughts are with everyone who lost loved ones or who was injured as a result of the troubles.

In answer to my hon. Friend’s question, everyone agrees that we have to avoid a hard border in Northern Ireland, and I agree with him that technology will play a big part in doing so. In fact, in his excellent and thought-provoking report “Order at the Border”, he identified 25 systems that will have to be updated to cope with our new relationship with the EU. Those systems are owned and operated by different departments across government, particularly Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Cabinet Office. I am sure they will describe their progress to him should he ask.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank the Minister for that answer. What work, studies or advice the Northern Ireland Office has sought or commissioned to examine how existing techniques and processes within existing EU customs law can maintain the free flow of cross-border trade between the UK and Ireland? Will Ministers put a copy of this in the House of Commons Library?

John Penrose: I understand that the Cabinet Office commissioned work on what existing software and other technologies are available from other low-friction land borders around the world to see whether they could provide a solution to the problem. The conclusion was that no existing off-the-shelf package could deliver exactly what will be needed in Northern Ireland, so new solutions will be needed. That is why the political declaration outlines that there will be urgent work on alternative arrangements to permanently guarantee no hard border in Northern Ireland.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): May I associate myself with the Minister’s remarks about Bloody Sunday? He will know that in that same city of Derry/Londonderry just a fortnight ago the dissident republicans tried to take more lives of Northern Irish citizens. Can he understand that the Chief Constable in Northern Ireland thinks that any infrastructure at the border—any technology—will be a target for those same dissidents? Will the Minister offer a guarantee here today that there will be no technology on or near the border, and therefore no violence at the border?

John Penrose: I am very happy to repeat what I said earlier: nobody, on any side—not just the police, as this is much more broad than that—wants a hard border in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, that is the best guarantee that there will not be one.

Dr Andrew Morrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the alternative arrangements the Government will be pursuing in the next fortnight have to do with technology and systems, as evidenced in the European Parliament’s “Smart Border 2.0” report in 2017, rather than a customs union that may potentially tie the United Kingdom into an arrangement in perpetuity?

John Penrose: All I can do here is go back to the Prime Minister’s point of order after the votes last night, where she explicitly said that she was going to take the decisions that had commanded a majority in Parliament back in not only reaching out to people who tabled amendments yesterday, but in her discussions with the EU. I am sure that none of us would want to rule in or out any particular methods of achieving those outcomes that have mandated by Parliament. We need to make sure that those discussions can move forward as freely as possible while still delivering on the outcomes that Parliament has decided.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): This week, the EU chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, has indicated that he has a team studying how we could have checks without having any points along the border, including by paperless means and decentralisation—checks away from the border. Will the Minister confirm that he will be seeking to work with the EU to deliver on those things?

John Penrose: I can do better than that. The Prime Minister, in her comments last night, already made the point that she wishes to discuss all these things with the EU. I would regard it as immensely promising if such a team were indeed already working on it from the EU’s side.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I join the Minister in his commemoration of the tragic events of Bloody Sunday, but may I also use this opportunity to recognise the work of and thank the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland? As he announces his forthcoming retirement, I think the whole House will agree that we owe him a debt of gratitude.

The Minister and the Secretary of State know that there is no operable technology anywhere in the world in current use that would not of itself become a target for the terrorists. The Prime Minister has said this in the past. We have to rule out the idea that a technological solution is available. If the Minister and the Secretary of State are going to use their influence to say that there can be no hard border across the island of Ireland, they
have to say that they will abandon the attempts to placate those in favour of a no-deal Brexit on their own side and move towards a customs union.

John Penrose: All I think I can do is repeat my earlier comments. After examination, there are no currently available, off-the-shelf solutions, which is why the political declaration says that new solutions will be required. I would not want to rule out what those will be and what they will include or not include at this stage, because clearly they will need to be innovative.

Peace and Reconciliation

2. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent steps she has taken to promote peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): May I associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Minister of State about Bloody Sunday? The shadow Secretary of State has pre-empted me, but I too have a debt of gratitude to George Hamilton, the Chief Constable of the PSNI.

The Government fully support efforts to promote peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. I was pleased to announce earlier this month that about £300 million of UK Government funding will be committed to projects to support peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland between 2021 and 2027.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Does the Secretary of State agree with me that no discussion of peace and reconciliation can take place without considering the plight of Northern Ireland veterans, both police and military, who put their lives on the line for their country? Will she assure the House that she personally will do all she can to draw a line under these investigations, which breach the military covenant and our pledge to police forces in the UK?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner on these matters. He will know from the extensive discussions we have had that I am committed to delivering on the legacy proposals that were first agreed in the Stormont House talks and on which we have had a consultation. I look forward to working with him further on those matters.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): From Caroline O’Hanlon to Carl Frampton, we know the ability of great Ulster sportsmen and women to bring people together. May I ask the Secretary of State about the curriculum sports programme? It receives £1.2 million of funding each year to provide Gaelic football, hurling and soccer coaching in 450 schools in Northern Ireland. That funding has been cut. Will she restore it to bring sport back to the people in all those communities?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman has campaigned on this matter. I know he is very keen to make sure that this funding is maintained. He makes a point about the fact that we do not have devolved government, which we will come on to later during questions. We do need Ministers in Northern Ireland to make those important decisions, because the example he raises is a very good one.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): The recent events in Derry/Londonderry clearly showed that the peace we have in Northern Ireland is still fragile at times. Given that, does my right hon. Friend agree with me that, as the Brexit process progresses, it is crucial that politicians on both sides of the border and indeed in this House use language that is measured rather than inflammatory?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We all need to be careful in our language at this very fragile time.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Secretary of State will recall the excellent work of the centenary committee that oversaw the world war one commemorations in Northern Ireland and sought to promote reconciliation through its work. As we look towards celebrating the centenary of Northern Ireland—this landmark in our history—will the Secretary of State assure me that she will work with us to do the same?

Karen Bradley: The success of the world war one commemorations in Northern Ireland was very much down to the right hon. Gentleman’s hard work in ensuring that all parts of the community came together. I think we saw a real moment in St Anne’s cathedral in November, when all parts of the community and the Irish Government came together with the UK Government to recognise what happened 100 years ago. I know he is very keen and we have met to discuss the 100th anniversary of the establishment of Northern Ireland, and we are working with him on it.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): To promote peace and reconciliation across the island of Ireland, will the Secretary of State confirm that, after Brexit, British and Irish citizens will of course continue to be able to cross freely the Irish border in accordance with the common travel area? Will the Secretary of State confirm that technological solutions are being looked at to ease the flow of other EU nationals across the Irish border?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the common travel area is a very important foundation of the lives of those in Northern Ireland and Ireland, and it of course predates our membership of the EU. We are absolutely committed to ensuring the common travel area continues. We want to see that, and it is a very important point.

Devolved Government

3. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What progress has been made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland.

6. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What progress has been made on restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The restoration of a fully functioning Executive and Assembly remains my top priority. I am focused on bringing the parties together to work towards re-establishing devolved government at the earliest opportunity.
Karen Bradley: We passed the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 last year to allow civil servants to take decisions based on guidance issued by me, as Secretary of State. I have to be clear that those are not major policy change decisions; they are to allow public services to continue to be delivered. The way to get through this is to get Ministers back into government.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): On behalf of the SNP, I join the Minister and the Labour Front-Bench spokesman in marking the tragic and entirely avoidable events of Bloody Sunday. Earlier this month, the former Taoiseach John Bruton accused this Government of seeking to tear up the Good Friday agreement. Last night, the Government did exactly that. As a result of recent events in Northern Ireland and the implications of last night’s vote, it is imperative that we get power sharing back up and running as soon as possible. Is the Secretary of State concerned that increasingly strained Anglo-Irish relations will harm efforts to restore Stormont?

Karen Bradley: I like the hon. Gentleman very much, but I could not disagree with him more. This Government are absolutely steadfast in our commitment to the Belfast Good Friday agreement, and we will do nothing that jeopardises it.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The House has just heard of the sad necessity of the setting of a budget for the coming financial year, in the absence of a devolved Assembly. May I ask the Secretary of State if she has begun discussions with the Northern Ireland civil service on this? While she is in such a warm and inclusive mood, may I ask her if she will follow the example of her predecessor and involve Opposition parties in the process?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman will recall that last year when the budget was set, I made sure, as Secretary of State, that all the main parties and the Opposition were part of the process. As I say, I would much rather that Ministers in Northern Ireland were setting the budget, but given the situation, we have to work together to make sure that a budget can be set.

Backstop Protocol

4. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Prime Minister on the backstop protocol in the EU Withdrawal Agreement.

8. Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Prime Minister on the backstop protocol in the EU Withdrawal Agreement.
9. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Prime Minister on the backstop protocol in the EU Withdrawal Agreement.  

**Karen Bradley:** I have regular discussions with the Prime Minister and others about all aspects of our exit from the European Union.

**Carol Monaghan:** Last October, the Secretary of State gave a guarantee that her Government would not renege on the backstop, saying:  

“We are committed to everything we have agreed to in the joint report and we will ensure there is no border on the island of Ireland.”

Can she explain why there has now been a U-turn and the Government’s policy has changed to ditching the backstop?

**Karen Bradley:** The commitments made in the joint report remain. Those commitments were that we would find a solution to the Irish border, ideally through our future relationship. We are still committed to that being the case. Last night, the House showed that there is a majority to pass the withdrawal agreement if changes are made to the backstop. The Prime Minister is working on that basis.

**Angela Crawley:** The deputy head of the Irish Government, Simon Coveney, has stated that  

“The backstop is already a compromise...And the European Parliament will not ratify a withdrawal agreement that doesn’t have a backstop in it.”

Again, that was confirmed last night by the EU. Does the Secretary of State agree that her Government are pursuing a dead-end policy by seeking to renegotiate the backstop?

**Karen Bradley:** Can I very gently point out to the hon. Lady that she voted against the backstop?

**Chris Law:** In order to protect the Good Friday agreement, the backstop protocol was designed as an insurance policy to prevent a hard border in all circumstances. The only major party in these islands that opposed the Good Friday agreement was the Democratic Unionist party. Did the Secretary of State consult with any other party in Northern Ireland before throwing her support behind the new Government policy of ditching the backstop?

**Karen Bradley:** This Government are committed to ensuring that we meet all our commitments under the Belfast-Good Friday agreement, and that we deliver on the vote of the British people to leave the European Union. That is what we are working to achieve.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): As the Prime Minister develops the alternative arrangements, will the Secretary of State remember that we have an incredibly close working relationship with the Irish Government to deliver the common travel area? It seems to me that perhaps provides a model for how we might deliver no hard border in the future.

**Karen Bradley:** Clearly it would not be appropriate to speculate on what discussions the Prime Minister will have with the European Union and the European Commission, but my right hon. Friend makes a very important point about the common travel area, to which, as I have said previously, we are absolutely committed.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Last night, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) made one of the most reckless and irresponsible speeches I have heard since coming to this place. The comments about the Good Friday agreement do not...[Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Gentleman is supposed to be asking a brief question, and the Secretary of State has no responsibility for the pronouncements of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). Single sentence, question mark, and sit down.

**Luke Graham:** Will my right hon. Friend assure the House, and the people in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, that that is not the case, and that we are committed to the Good Friday agreement?

**Karen Bradley:** I can absolutely do that. This Government are committed to ensuring that we deliver on leaving the European Union in a way that works for all people who live in the United Kingdom, wherever that may be, fully respecting the commitments that we have under the Belfast-Good Friday agreement.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): We do not have much time to find new technological solutions. In October, from the Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister said that “technical solutions effectively involve moving the border—and it would still be a border. Some involve equipment, which could come under attack, and some involve a degree of state surveillance that, frankly, I think would not be acceptable in Northern Ireland.”—[Official Report, 15 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 421.]

Does the Secretary of State agree with the Prime Minister?

**Karen Bradley:** If the hon. Lady had listened to my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, in his answer to the first question, it was clear that we have said as a Government that no technological solutions, off the shelf, exist today that solve this problem, but we are committed to working to find alternative arrangements because we have all agreed that the backstop, should it ever come into force, is a temporary measure. No one wants to be in it, and we want to find ways of avoiding it.

**Devolution**

5. **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What recent steps she has taken to help restore devolution in Northern Ireland.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent steps she has taken to help restore devolution in Northern Ireland.
Karen Bradley: Last year, I passed the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018, which creates a limited period in which an Executive can be formed at any time. I am actively encouraging the parties to use that opportunity to come together to make progress on restoring the Executive.

Rosie Cooper: On 31 October, at the last Northern Ireland questions, the Secretary of State answered questions on restoring devolution and said:

“The point of the legislation is that it provides the space and the time for the parties to come together”—[Official Report, 31 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 895.]

That language almost suggests that she does not have any role in it. Will she therefore outline what she has actually done to convene talks, or have we given up?

Karen Bradley: As Secretary of State, I clearly have a role in helping to facilitate those talks, but I cannot impose a solution on the parties in Northern Ireland. That must be something that they want to do for the good of the people in Northern Ireland. I am working to find that.

Kerry McCarthy: Environmental campaigners in Northern Ireland have raised concerns with me about the fact that the push towards ever-more intensive industrialised farming is continuing unchecked because of the power vacuum. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs does not seem to be interested. May I urge the Northern Ireland Office to take an interest in the environmental damage that is being caused by that trend?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady will know that DEFRA does not have jurisdiction over environmental policies in Northern Ireland; that is for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland. I am sure the permanent secretary has heard her comments.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In endeavouring to restore devolution, will the Secretary of State ensure that there is appropriate emphasis on those who caused devolution to fall in the first place and are refusing to enter in without preconditions being met?

Karen Bradley: It is important that we find a framework in which the parties can come together. I know that the hon. Gentleman feels strongly that a devolved Government should be in place in Stormont delivering for his constituents. That is what I want to see.

Rural Hospitals: Public Transport

7. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): If she will hold discussions with the Northern Ireland civil service on the provision in Northern Ireland of public transport servicing rural hospitals.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): As I am sure my right hon. Friend is aware, public transport in Northern Ireland is a devolved issue. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 allows Northern Ireland Departments to continue to deliver public services in the absence of a functioning Executive. There are ongoing discussions on all these issues, including services to hospitals.

Robert Halfon: The brain injury charity Headway recently supported a lorry driver who had to pay £370 in hospital car parking charges to visit his comatose son in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast. Will my hon. Friend work with the Secretary of State to scrap hospital car parking charges once and for all?

John Penrose: My right hon. Friend is pursuing one of the energetic and effective campaigns that have become his signature in Parliament. I believe that he is also pursuing the issue at Welsh and Scottish questions. I am sure that many of us have a great deal of sympathy with the case he described, but changing the policy in Northern Ireland to deal with it is best done by a functioning Executive at Stormont. I hope that he will agree that that is the clearest possible illustration of why people in Northern Ireland need the Executive to reform as soon as possible.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Community transport gives rural dwellers access to hospital care, but in the past four years it has been reduced by 40%. What measures will the Minister put in place to ensure that is addressed in the new budget?

John Penrose: The difficulty that everybody faces at the moment is that all budgetary allocations have to be done on a business-as-usual basis. To make more fundamental changes and reforms—to modernise anything in any devolved area—requires the Stormont Executive to be sitting. I share the hon. Gentleman’s desire for change, but the answer, I am afraid, is that we have to get Stormont working.

Supporting Business

10. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What recent steps has she taken to support Northern Ireland’s business community.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): At the autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced £350 million for a Belfast city region deal to boost investment and productivity, and the opening of formal negotiations for a Derry/Londonderry and Strabane city region deal. Furthermore, late last year, I was delighted to announce a £700,000 investment in Randox, a County Antrim life sciences company. That investment, through the Government’s industrial strategy, should help create well-paid manufacturing jobs in Northern Ireland.

Daniel Kawczynski: Government Members are starting to feel more and more like honorary Ulstermen. Will the Minister commit to increasing and expanding the city deal to other cities in Northern Ireland to help that integral part of the United Kingdom?

John Penrose: I can confirm, as I have already mentioned, that the Derry/Londonderry and Strabane city deal discussions have begun, following my right hon. Friend
the Chancellor’s announcement, and I am sure that everybody here hopes they will progress speedily and successfully.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eilean an Iar) (SNP): We know that the business community in Northern Ireland does not want a hard border, so surely, if technology and connected promises do not avoid that, the backstop is an understandable insurance policy for Dublin and the European Union, as indeed the United Kingdom agreed in December 2017. Surely the Government will not be reneging on that promise, which is beneficial to business.

John Penrose: I keep coming back to it, but Parliament voted last night and a democratic consensus has been reached. We all need to respect that decision.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [908899] Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 30 January.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will want to join me in sending our thoughts and prayers to all those affected by the collapse of the Brumadinho dam in Brazil. We are in touch with the local authorities and stand ready to provide whatever support we can.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and, in addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Toby Perkins: I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s comments about the tragic situation in Brazil.

My son is one of thousands of young people to have their life chances transformed by their studies at Chesterfield College. Its funding, like that of further education colleges across the country, is 30% down in real terms since this Government came to power. Further education funding is in crisis. Why is the education of young people in further education colleges worth so little to the Government?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman could not be more wrong. It is this Government who are ensuring that by 2020 the funding available to support—[Hon. Members: “Now!”] The funding we are putting into further education is providing the best life chances for young people going into further education. It is this Government who are taking steps to ensure that young people can take up the opportunities that are right for them. For too long in this country, the assumption has been that the only way to get on in life is to go to university, and other ways, such as apprenticeships and further education colleges, have not been similarly respected. It is this Government who are ensuring respect for further education, and for technical education as well.

Q8. [908906] Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that last year was the worst on record for the deaths, imprisonment and hostage taking of journalists, with 80 across the world killed in the course of their work. Does she agree that journalists fulfil a vital role in a free society, and will she ensure that every opportunity is taken to put pressure on the Governments with the worst records to respect media freedom and take action to protect international journalism?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue. I certainly agree about the important role a free press and journalists play in our democracies, and I thank him for raising an issue that I know is important to him and many Members across the House. Sadly, as he says, 80 journalists we killed in 2018; 348 are currently in prison and 60 are being held hostage around the world. We are deeply concerned because, as he said, these numbers have risen on the previous year. That is why in 2019 we are placing our resources behind the cause of media freedom. We are helping to train journalists around the world, such as in Venezuela, where we have seen an authoritarian Government suppress their critics, and this year we plan to host an international conference in London on media freedom to bring together countries that believe in this cause and to mobilise an international consensus behind the protection of journalists. This is an important issue, and the Government are putting their weight behind it.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in sending support to the victims of the Brumadinho dam collapse in Brazil. I am very pleased that all possible support is being offered to the authorities there to try to deal with the crisis.

Following the vote in the House last night against no deal, the Prime Minister is again going to attempt to renegotiate the backstop on the basis of finding “alternative arrangements”. Will she tell us what those alternative arrangements might be?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely. Last night, the House set a clear direction on the way in which it could agree a deal, and that, as the right hon. Gentleman says, is about dealing with the issue of the backstop. As I said yesterday, there are a number of proposals for how that could be done. We are engaging positively with proposals that have been put forward by my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and my hon. Friends the Members for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), for Wycombe (Mr Baker) and for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). Others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), have put forward different proposals, such as a unilateral exit mechanism—

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Where are they?

The Prime Minister: I am just telling the shadow Foreign Secretary, if she will listen—let me give her a piece of advice: if she wants to shout things, it might be better to shout them in response to what I am saying.

My right hon. and hon. Friends have put forward proposals such as a unilateral exit mechanism or a time limit to the backstop. The political declaration already refers to alternative arrangements and raises a number of proposals that can be addressed, such as mutual recognition of trusted trader schemes.

Jeremy Corbyn: None of that was very clear to me: I do not know about anybody else. It would have been really nice if the Prime Minister had acknowledged that she did whip her MPs to try to support no deal, and she was defeated on that.
The EU said at the weekend that it was willing to renegotiate if the Government's red lines could change. Will the Prime Minister now tell us which of her red lines are going to change?

**The Prime Minister:** What has been absolutely clear in my contacts with European Union leaders is that they want a deal. What the House voted for last night was to leave the European Union with a deal, but it also crucially showed what it will take to see support in the House for a deal in the future. I think that the plan that was set out last night shows that we can obtain a substantial and sustainable majority in the House.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about not being clear about positions on various things. I am very pleased that he is now going to meet me, because there are a number of issues that I want to discuss with him. For example, he talks about a strong single market relationship with the European Union in the future. I want to know whether that means that he wants to accept all EU state aid rules, because he has objected to them in the past, and he cannot have it both ways.

We need to know, with greater clarity, what it is that the right hon. Gentleman believes in. Perhaps next time one of his own Back Benchers wants to ask him about his position on a second referendum, he will actually take a question or an intervention.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Last time I looked at the Order Paper, it said "Prime Minister's Question Time". The Prime Minister has herself said that "the only possible deal" is within her red lines, so it is perfectly reasonable to ask which of her red lines has changed.

This morning, the Brexit Secretary was asked: "What is the alternative to the backstop?"

He replied:

"Well, that is what we're exploring."

Can the Prime Minister tell us which options are being explored?

**The Prime Minister:** I covered that in the answer to one of the right hon. Gentleman's earlier questions. Perhaps if he listened to the answers to his questions, he would not have to repeat them.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I look forward to meeting the Prime Minister later today, because I want to put forward Labour's alternatives, which could command a majority in the House and which are about protecting jobs and people's living standards across the country.

This morning, the Brexit Secretary said that alternative arrangements meant looking at technology. That is a very interesting question. Will the Prime Minister make clear what technological advances she is expecting to be made in the next 58 days?

**The Prime Minister:** May I say to the right hon. Gentleman that it would be helpful—[Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I want to hear about these matters.

**The Prime Minister:** I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I have pointed out that there are a number of options that people are putting forward that we are working positively with them on. I have already referenced a number of things that are in the political declaration on alternative arrangements that do set out various aspects that could be looked at; I referenced one of them in my answer to his earlier question.

But I would also say to the right hon. Gentleman that last night the House did vote to reject no deal, but it also voted to do what the European Union has consistently asked this House to do since it rejected the withdrawal agreement, which was to say what the UK wanted to see changed. Last night, a majority in this House voted to maintain the commitment to no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, to leave the European Union with a deal and to set out to the European Union what it will take to ensure that this House can support a deal. That is a change to the backstop; that is what I will be taking back to the European Union. That is what we will be doing to ensure that we can avoid no deal. The right hon. Gentleman stands up regularly and says he does not want no deal; I am working to ensure we get a deal. He has opposed every move by this Government to get a deal; he is the one who is risking no deal.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I would be grateful if the Prime Minister actually acknowledged that the House has voted to take no deal off the table. Can she assure the House that if she is unable to secure any legal changes to the backstop, she will work to find a solution based on a comprehensive customs union, a strong single market deal and the guaranteeing of rights and protections, rather than go back to the alternative that she has been threatening everybody with for months and months, which was to crash out without any deal whatsoever?

**The Prime Minister:** Last night, the House did vote to reject no deal, but that cannot be the end of the story.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Of course not.

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman says "Of course not." I think that is the first time he has actually accepted that you cannot just vote to reject no deal; you have to vote for a deal, otherwise you leave with no deal. So far, he has opposed everything this Government have put forward in relation to a deal, and he said previously he will reject any deal that the Government put on the table. He says this is Prime Minister's questions, but people want to know his position as well. Will he ensure that if this Government come back with a revised deal that ensures we do not leave with no deal, he will actually support it?

**Jeremy Corbyn:** It really is time that the Prime Minister acknowledges that she has got to move on from the red lines she has put down in the first place, and she does not acknowledge that in answer to my questions or indeed anybody else's.

Our responsibility is to bring people together, whether they voted—[Interruption.] Mr Speaker, we are the Houses of Parliament; we are the House of Commons; we do represent the entire country; and the point I am making is that we should bring people together, whether they voted to leave or remain. Indeed, I look forward to meeting the Prime Minister to discuss a solution that could in my view unite the country. Changes to the backstop alone will not be sufficient. Businesses and trade unions are very clear that any solution must
involve a customs union and the strongest possible deal with the single market to avoid the damage of no deal. The Prime Minister may have possibly temporarily united her party, but is she willing—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Ellis, you were at one time a barrister of one rank or another in the courts; there is no way that you would have been allowed to shout from a sedentary position in that way. The judge would have ruled you out of order; I do not know whether that is why you stopped practising law and came into Parliament. Behave yourself young man; you can do so much better when you try.

Jeremy Corbyn: As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted—[Interruption]—the Prime Minister may have succeeded in temporarily uniting her very divided party, but is she willing to make the necessary compromises, which are more important, to unite the country going forward to secure jobs and living standards right across the UK?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is a fine one to talk about coming together, when it was only last night that he agreed to actually meet me to talk about these issues. Time and again, he has said that the backstop is not the only issue in the withdrawal agreement, but last night the house voted by a majority to say that the issue that needed to be addressed was the backstop, so he needs to listen to the House and to recognise that. He put forward a proposal last night that referenced the customs union and the single market, but his proposal was rejected by this House. I will tell him what this Government have been doing. Over the past week, we have been getting more teachers into schools, we have been ensuring that we are giving more money to councils and we have won a majority on Brexit. What did he manage? His Brexit plan was voted down, he opposed ending free movement and he will not rule out a second referendum. He has no plan was voted down, he opposed ending free movement majority on Brexit. What did he manage? His Brexit giving more money to councils and we have won a

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): First-time buyer numbers, which collapsed under the last Labour Government, are now at a 10-year high thanks to initiatives such as Help to Buy and the first-time buyer stamp duty cut, but there are still many people in their 20s and 30s who want to buy their own home. Will the Prime Minister join me in asking local authorities to use their existing powers when they grant planning consents to ensure that as many properties as possible are designated as starter homes or discount market sales homes, to help those people in their 20s and 30s to realise the dream of home ownership?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue and points out not only the good news of the 10-year high in the number of first-time buyers but the opportunities available for local authorities to provide for this. We are clear that the planning system has a key role in delivering more affordable homes, and the national planning policy framework, which was revised last year, is central to that. It includes a wider definition of affordable housing, and local authorities are expected to consider the new definition—which includes starter homes and discounted market sales homes—in identifying the types of housing their communities need. There is an expectation that major developments will make a minimum of 10% of homes available for affordable ownership, including starter homes and discounted market sales homes. We have made good progress on first-time buyers, but there is more for us to do and this Government are doing it.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister told this House that if we voted down the deal in the hope of going back to Brussels and negotiating an alternative deal, no such alternative deal would exist, yet last night she told the House that she would go back to Brussels to seek an alternative arrangement. So what is it? Has the Prime Minister inadvertently misled the House, or has this Government’s incompetence reached a whole new level?

The Prime Minister: The very simple fact that the right hon. Gentleman appears to have omitted is that the deal was brought to the House of Commons and the House rejected that deal. Therefore, we looked to see what could be changed, what we could take back to Brussels and what we could fight for to ensure that the deal could get the support of the House. I was going to respond to his point of order last night, but unfortunately, when I looked, he had left. I think he had gone to do a Sky News interview—[Interruption.] I want to confirm absolutely the commitment of this Government to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and the remarks that he made last night in relation to that were frankly irresponsible.

Ian Blackford: The only thing that is irresponsible are the actions of this Prime Minister—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman has a right to be heard, the public would expect him to be heard, and he will be heard. Attempts to shout him down are not just rude; they are irresponsible and undemocratic, and they should certainly not have the sanction of anyone who sits on the Treasury Bench. Stop it! It is low grade, it is useless and it will not work.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That was a graceless response from the Prime Minister, who is acting with sheer irresponsibility. What she demonstrated in that answer was, “Here are my principles. If you don’t like them, you can have some more.”

Last night, a majority of Scottish MPs rejected Brexit. The Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Stop it. Chanting in the background is utterly irresponsible. Let the right hon. Gentleman ask his question and the Prime Minister answer it. That is what the public would expect.

Ian Blackford: The Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and this House of Commons have rejected the Prime Minister’s deal. The UK Government told Scotland in 2014 that being part of the UK meant continued EU membership. The UK Government told us that we would be part of a family of equal nations. Prime Minister, Scotland wants to stay in the EU. We are scunnered by this Government ignoring Scotland. Does the Prime Minister accept that she promised Scotland everything but delivered nothing?
Q11. [908909]Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): There is a clear choice between remaining in the customs union or a fully functioning independent UK trade policy. Does my right hon. Friend think it is time to have a free trade policy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about what we are aiming to ensure that we get from leaving the European Union, which is the ability to have that independent trade policy. That is so important for us as we leave the EU. Yes, I want to have a good trade relationship with the EU, but I also want to ensure that we are able to have an independent trade policy and have trade deals around the world. This country should be a champion for free trade around the world. That is the way not only to enhance our economy and prosperity and to bring jobs to this country, but to benefit countries around the world, including some of the countries whose economies need to be helped and improved. Some of the poorest people in the world would be helped by those trade arrangements. That is what we are going to deliver and that is our commitment to the British people and, as my hon. Friend says, it delivers on the result of the referendum.

Q2. [908900]Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): My constituent Lynne Sherman, who has two terminal illnesses, reapplied for her personal independence payment on 19 September, but she did not receive a home visit assessment until 6 January. She has still not received a decision on her claim. Does the Prime Minister consider it fair or sensible that, in addition to losing her benefit, Ms Sherman has also lost her blue badge, her bus pass and her carers?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a specific constituency case, and I will ask the relevant Department to look into the details of that case.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): On 12 July last year, my constituents took their son Jack to Leeds Children’s Hospital for surgery on his craniostenosis. The surgery went well but, after that care, Jack declined post surgery. His parents raised concerns, and he had declined so much by 16 July that a nurse raised concerns about sepsis. Jack continued to be treated for gastroenteritis, and the next day Jack died of overwhelming sepsis. Sadly, this is now the subject of a coroner’s inquest, but my constituents want to ensure that this never happens again to another set of parents. Jack was just three days short of his second birthday. The hospital has since introduced an early-warning system for paediatric sepsis, but that came too late for Jack. Can the Prime Minister assure me that she will do everything in her power to ensure that no other parent has to go through what my constituents have been through?

The Prime Minister: First, I am sure the whole House will join me in sending our deepest condolences to the family and friends of Jack. A terrible tragedy has occurred with the loss of such a young life.

We recognise, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) will confirm, that sepsis is a devastating condition, and it is important that the NHS carries on developing its programme of work on recognising sepsis and improving outcomes. I know NHS England and NHS Improvement are working urgently with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health to establish a single England-wide paediatrics early-warning system to improve the recognition of sepsis and the response of healthcare services to children and young people.

Obviously, nothing we can do will bring Jack back or compensate for the devastating impact on his family, but I can reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), and I hope he will be able to reassure his constituents, that we will continue to do all we can to improve the care for those with this devastating condition.

Q3. [908901]Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Prime Minister will know that there is a rising tide of racism in our country. Since she came to office, race hate crime has increased by 100% to 72,000 separate attacks last year. What is happening to our country on her watch?

The Prime Minister: When I was Home Secretary, I took measures to ensure that we improved the recording of hate crime because—[Interruption.] Actually, no. We did not have a full picture of what was happening.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has recently reviewed and revised our hate crime strategy, but that point underlining what the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) has said is that none of us should accept hate crime. We should all be very clear from this House that there is no place for hate crime in our society. Wherever we see racism, in whatever form, we should all take action to eradicate it.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In her discussions with EU leaders, will the Prime Minister be making it crystal clear that this Government stand firmly behind all their commitments under the Belfast/Good Friday agreement?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that absolute assurance and commitment. We stand fully behind our commitments under the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and everything we do will be in light of those commitments.

Q4. [908902]Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Batley and Spen is a community made up of small towns and villages, and buses are a valued and essential service. I am sure the Prime Minister will sympathise
with my constituents’ anger at the cuts to services announced by Arriva this week, so much so that commutes are thrown into chaos and people cannot get to the shops. One headteacher told me they are concerned about how their pupils will actually get to school. Does the Prime Minister agree that people are more important than profit? Is it not time to invest in bus services, after years of cuts, and bring them under public control?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the importance of buses to local communities, which is why we spend £250 million every year to keep fares down and maintain an extensive network that benefits people up and down the country. We particularly put money into supporting free bus travel for older and disabled people, because we recognise how particularly important buses are to vulnerable people. We are looking at what we can do to further improve access for people with disabilities, but we have been putting money in to ensure that there remains an extensive bus network that is of benefit to local communities.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Last night, a majority of this House voted in favour of a deal to deliver on the democratic will of the people of the United Kingdom and leave the EU. In the next phase of the negotiations, will my right hon. Friend continue to stand firm against the fishing nations of the EU and their vain attempts to maintain guaranteed common fisheries policy?

The Prime Minister: I can give my hon. Friend an absolute commitment that I will do that. Leaving the common fisheries policy and becoming an independent coastal state is so important to this country, to enable us to enhance and give opportunities to fishing communities around the United Kingdom. I recognise that fishing is particularly important in Scotland, but fishing communities around the UK will benefit from our becoming an independent coastal state. I am very clear: our position is there, we have that agreement, and it is not up for renegotiation.

Q5. [908905] Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Prime Minister will be aware of Sir John Gillen’s report on the laws and procedures around serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland. The very serious preliminary report has already revealed that the conviction rate is declining in Northern Ireland, that we have the longest delays in getting cases to trial, and that there is a 40% drop-out rate among those who want to go to trial. These are serious issues. What is the Prime Minister going to be able to do to ensure that any changes in the law that Sir John Gillen recommends can be implemented in Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: Clearly, this is a very serious issue, and I understand that the judiciary and devolved justice authorities in Northern Ireland are keeping it under close and active consideration. Of course, as the hon. Gentleman knows, policing and justice is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, as is the length of custodial sentences. In recently passing the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland enabled Departments to continue to take decisions in the public interest to ensure the continued operation of public services, but that is not and cannot be a replacement for a devolved Government. The example the hon. Gentleman has given is yet another reason why it is important for us all to work to get the devolved Administration back up and running.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): The Prime Minister will appreciate that the Government are spending over 50% more per head, in real terms, on education than was spent in the year 2000—and achieving much better results, might I add. However, there are still some challenges with resources and funding in many areas across Hitchin and Harpenden, especially in small rural schools. Will the Prime Minister commit to special consideration for education in the upcoming spending review? I believe that would command widespread support across the House.

The Prime Minister: I think the Chancellor was listening to my hon. Friend’s remarks and comments on funding. As he says, it is absolutely right that we have been putting more money into schools. It is also right that we now see 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than there were in 2010. We will of course look carefully across all elements of public expenditure when we come to the spending review but, as I said to my hon. Friend, I am sure the Chancellor has heard the lobbying in which my hon. Friend indulged in his question, particularly for small rural schools.

Q7. [908905] Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Unlike this Government, John Lewis has never knowingly undersold Portsmouth, but last week partners announced that they are closing Knight & Lee, a much-loved store in the heart of my community since 1865. That is just one example. Retailer after retailer, store after store, job after job—when will the Government finally bring our high streets back from the brink?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that this is a concerning time for the employees at Knight & Lee in Southsea. It is obviously a commercial decision for the company to take. We will ensure that the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus work with the company to understand the level of employee support required. I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that if he is worried about jobs in his constituency, the policies that would cause most damage to jobs there are the policies of the Labour party and those on the Labour Front Bench.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Last week, SNP-led Moray Council announced a number of devastating cuts to local services, many of which will impact young people. From the closing of libraries and swimming pools to the ending of the Active Schools programme and increasing of fees for music tuition, young people are affected while the council’s highest-paid senior managers are not. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the SNP in Moray should focus on services rather than managers, and will she call on the Scottish Government to deliver a fairer funding deal for Moray?

The Prime Minister: Of course, the UK Government have increased the block grant that is going to the Scottish Government next year, so decisions on cutting budgets are a matter of priority for the SNP rather than necessity. Extra money has been given to them. It is a question of where they want to put that money and
what they put as a priority. It is time that the SNP empowered local government in Scotland, rather than hoarding power at Holyrood.

Q9. [908897] Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Next week is World Cancer Day. I regret to say that, last week, St Clare’s Hospice in Jarrow closed as a result of funding difficulties. Will the Prime Minister use her offices to facilitate a meeting between me and the relevant Health Minister to see if we can secure and ensure healthcare for the terminally ill in future in the Jarrow constituency?

The Prime Minister: I will ensure that the relevant Minister meets the hon. Gentleman and addresses this issue with him.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): With record numbers of women in the workplace now, more and more women will experience the symptoms of peri-menopause or menopause while they are at work. Often, the symptoms are not well understood by the general population and they include much more than just hot flushes and night sweats. Will the Prime Minister please join my campaign, which calls on employers to update their health and wellbeing policies to ensure that women can get full information and proper support so that they can continue contributing at work?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Obviously, this is something that many Members across this House will recognise as an important issue. We recognise the difficulties that women going through the menopause face. We are encouraging employers to adopt menopause-friendly policies such as flexible working and giving women information about healthy lifestyles that may help to improve their experience of the menopause. I will certainly encourage all employers, as she is doing, to take reasonable steps, including those that she has referenced, to support employees so that they can continue to carry out their jobs and contribute to our economy in the way they have done so far.

Q12. [908910] Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Prime Minister, we are 58 days away from a cliff. If we plunge over the precipice into an abyss, our country will be poorer in every sense of the word. Last night, this House voted that there can be no question of a no-deal Brexit. Will the Prime Minister honour the will of Parliament and rule out a no-deal Brexit, because to proceed with a no-deal Brexit will not only impoverish our country, but be contemptuous of Parliament?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman is right that, last night, Parliament voted to reject no deal. What Parliament also voted for last night was to say that it wanted to leave the European Union with a deal, and it identified what was necessary to change in the deal in order to enable that to happen and for the House to support a deal. That is where we should be focusing. We can only ensure that we avoid no deal by having a deal, by agreeing a deal and by this House supporting a deal and voting for a deal.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for her commitment yesterday to return to Brussels and reopen the text of the withdrawal agreement? That is the right thing to do. People in Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland will welcome it because they want to leave with a good deal for our country. I commend the excellent compromise proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), which has every chance of success in unifying this Parliament and this country behind a good exit.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, there was a very clear message from the House last night as to what needs to happen in terms of returning to Brussels, but also we are engaging positively, as my hon. Friend said, with the proposals that my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire and others have put forward in relation to dealing with the issue of the backstop.

Q13. [908911] Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Next week marks five years since the train line at Dawlish began in November, with essential repairs to the breakwaters. That is part of the £15 million wider investment to make the railway at Dawlish and Teignmouth more resilient to extreme weather. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that world-leading engineers have been carrying out the detailed ground investigations to develop a long-term solution to protect the railway in a way that minimises disruption for passengers. Network Rail will soon be reporting on how it will deliver this solution. I am clear that delivering this improvement to the south-west’s transport infrastructure is a national priority. It is essential for unlocking the region’s economic prosperity and jobs, and that is why we are giving it the focus that we are.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Cotmanhay Junior School in my constituency has increased its proportion of pupils attaining the required level of key stage 2 standards from 35% to an amazing 67% over the last year. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the pupils, the teachers and the head, Simon Robinson, and 13 other primary schools across Erewash, on all improving their key stage 2 performances?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to hear of the increase in performance at Cotmanhay Junior School. The education of children is improving, regardless of where they live or their background, so that they can get the education that they need to fulfil their potential. I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the pupils and staff of that particular school, and of the other schools she referenced across her Erewash constituency that have seen improvements, which are important for the future of those children.

Q14. [908912] Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Yesterday evening, MPs from across the House voted against a no deal. The TUC has warned that no deal
The Prime Minister: The House rejected no deal last night, but I hope that the hon. Lady, when the time comes, will play her part in avoiding no deal and will vote for a deal.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): The Prime Minister knows that I want to ensure that we leave the European Union on 29 March. She also knows that, regrettfully, I could not support her deal two weeks ago because of the backstop, its impact on the relationship between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and its potential to trap us in a customs union. I welcome the fact that the House yesterday voted by a clear majority to renegotiate the backstop. If the Prime Minister can deliver that, I will vote for her deal, and I am confident that there will be a sustainable majority to get it and the legislation through the House. I ask my right hon. Friend to tell the European Union that there is a majority in this House for that deal to get us out of the European Union on good terms. I ask my colleagues to give the Prime Minister space; the EU is not going to crumble tomorrow. We are going to have to hold our nerve and we can be successful.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of the vote that took place last night. Winning that vote with a majority—agreeing what it was necessary to change in the withdrawal agreement in order to achieve a majority across this House—gave a very clear message to the European Union that a deal can go through this House, but it has to be a deal that recognises the concerns that have been expressed across the whole of this House in relation to the backstop. I am going to be fighting for the change that this House has been very clear that it wants to see in the future. Then, as my right hon. Friend says, I am confident that we can see a sustainable and substantial majority across this House for leaving with the deal.

Q15. [908913] Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Anna is a carer for the elderly, living with her girls in a flat above Barclays bank. Because her husband left, she cannot pay the rent without claiming universal credit. She does not have a guarantor, so Barclays agents are evicting her—another private landlord evicting a hard-working family on universal credit. Will the Prime Minister intervene and ask Barclays to grant Anna a tenancy so that her girls are not just two more children added to the 130,000 children in this country in temporary accommodation?

The Prime Minister: Like one of her hon. Friends, the hon. Lady has raised an individual constituency case and the details of that individual constituency case. I will ask the relevant Minister to look into that case and to be—[Interruption.] She is asking me to take a position purely on the question that she has asked me. I am asking the Minister in the relevant Department to look into the case and to be able to assess that case and to respond to her.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): This afternoon we shall be debating the Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Bill, which, among other things, will facilitate the cross-border exchange of data, enabling us to investigate crimes such as terrorism and paedophilia. Is it not the responsibility of all of us in this House to wholeheartedly support that Bill?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely, yes. This is a very important Bill in the impact that it will have. I am sure that everybody across this whole House wants to ensure that we can deal with terrorism, with paedophilia and indeed with other organised crime. Exchange of data is an important way of doing that, and I hope that everybody will see the importance of support for that.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): In recent days we have heard the Irish Prime Minister talk about bringing his troops up to the border in the event of no deal. We have heard the Irish Deputy Foreign Minister talking of people jumping out of windows. Is not this highly reckless talk extremely dangerous in the present circumstances? That sort of rhetoric should be toned down and we should instead focus on what Michel Barnier said the other day—that even in the event of no deal, we would sit down and find operational ways to have checks and controls away from the border. Is not that the way forward? And it blows a hole in the entire concept of this backstop.

The Prime Minister: Obviously it is important—I will be speaking to the Taoiseach later today—for us to work with the Government of Ireland on the arrangements that will be in place in the future. We have obviously sent a clear message from this House about what needs to happen in relation to the backstop. We retain our commitment to no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and look to working with the Government of Ireland and with the European Union to ensure that we can all maintain our commitments under the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and that commitment to no hard border on the island of Ireland.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last Sunday, we commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day, when we remembered the darkest period in Europe’s history. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the Holocaust Educational Trust, its youth ambassadors, and the incredible survivors, who give their personal testimony to young people so that they will remember what the ultimate destination of racial hatred and antisemitism truly is?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the excellent work that the Holocaust Educational Trust does, and the youth ambassadors. I have met some of these youth ambassadors, who have understood the importance of learning the lesson from the holocaust, and understood the importance of acting against antisemitism wherever it occurs—and, indeed, wider racial hatred. As my hon. Friend says, the survivors from the holocaust have given their time to ensuring that nobody is in any doubt about where man’s inhumanity to man can lead. They have done a really important job.
I pay tribute to them and to their continuing work. It is important that we all recognise the terrible things that can happen when we let antisemitism occur. We should all be fighting against antisemitism wherever it occurs.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): In the cold of Sunday, Kane Walker was found dead on the pavements of Birmingham. He was 31, and he became one of over 2,600 homeless people to have lost their lives in the last five years. When will the Prime Minister recognise that the scale of homelessness today is a moral emergency, and that we cannot wait until 2027 for this Government to end homelessness for good when we need action now?

The Prime Minister: First, we all want to ensure that everybody in this country can have a safe and secure roof over their head—that nobody has to be on the streets sleeping rough. That is why we are putting money into this. We have taken a number of initiatives like Housing First which are already showing benefits in helping people who would otherwise be homeless and could end up on the streets in having a home and dealing with the issues that ensure that they are able to stay in that home. This is something that we recognise the importance of. That is why we are putting money into it. That is why we are acting. That is why we are ensuring that action is being taken across the country to deal with this.
Draft Domestic Abuse Bill: Territorial Extent

12.50 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the territorial extent of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill and the consequences of this for victims of violence across the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The landmark draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which we published last week, will help to transform the response to these horrific crimes. It is aimed at supporting victims and their families and pursuing offenders, to stop the cycle of violence. The Bill will cement a statutory definition of domestic abuse that extends beyond violence to include emotional, psychological and economic abuse. The Bill does not create new criminal offences in relation to domestic abuse, because those offences are already settled law—for example, section 18 grievous bodily harm, coercive and controlling behaviour and even, in the saddest of cases, murder—and are all devolved.

In line with existing criminal law, the provisions of the draft Bill extend to England and Wales only. Contrary to the suggestion in the hon. Lady’s question, there has been no change in the territorial application of the Bill compared with the proposals in the Government’s consultation published last spring. That was made clear in the consultation paper and reflects the fact that the subject matter of the draft Bill is devolved in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

We are currently in discussion with the Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Department of Justice about whether they wish to extend any of the Bill’s provisions to Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively. We are seeking to establish a Joint Committee of both Houses as soon as practicable to undertake pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill, and I encourage the hon. Lady and all Members to contribute to that process.

Stella Creasy: Domestic abuse affects communities in every nation in the UK, yet last week, after two and a half years of waiting, the Government published a draft Bill that restricts action to only England and Wales. I am asking this question not to debate the nature of devolution, but to ask why this Bill has been restricted when what was promised from the outset was very different.

The original consultation recognised that “Insecure immigration status may also impact on a victim’s decision to seek help.”

We know that migrant women are much less likely to seek help because they fear deportation. Some may point to other immigration legislation going through this place, but that does not include anything on this issue either. This Bill would have been the vehicle for helping those victims, as immigration is not a devolved matter.

The then Home Secretary, who is now the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, has rightly recognised that financial destitution can hold women in abusive relationships. This Bill contains much to be welcomed regarding action in the courts and an independent commissioner, but because it is restricted, it does not address critical areas of policy. Why, after two and a half years, would the Government do this?

The Sunday Times provided the answer this weekend, with confirmation that the Bill had been vetted by the Cabinet Office and that the Government feared making the Bill UK-wide because of the Democratic Unionist party. Why? Because this Bill is also about implementing the convention on violence against women—a convention the United Nations has said that we are breaching right now, because citizens in Northern Ireland are denied the right to choose not to continue an unwanted pregnancy.

Today, a brave young woman aged just 28, Sarah Ewart, is taking our Government to court to vindicate her human rights. She suffered a fatal foetal abnormality but, as a resident of Northern Ireland, was denied the right to an abortion at home, so she had to travel to England, as 28 women a week currently do. Last June, the Supreme Court told the Government that this situation breached the rights of UK women, but because of a technicality, it could not compel them to act.

This Bill from the outset could have been the remedy, but this weekend’s revelations show that the Government have drafted the Bill with a mind not to the victims of domestic violence but to their partners in the coalition. The Bill talks about domestic abuse protection orders, which are supposed to have effect across the whole of the UK, yet there is no clarity, given the restricted scope, on how the Government intend to compel Scotland or Northern Ireland to act on them. Given that the original consultation talked of working with the Northern Ireland Executive, these problems are clearly of the Government’s own making and a direct response to the call for equal rights for the women of Northern Ireland.

Given this mess, can the Minister confirm at which of the DUP co-ordination committees this decision was taken? It is not minuted in the notes of those meetings from July 2017 to Christmas 2018. The power to veto legislation affecting all of the UK is not in the confidence and supply agreement, which I note was updated on 19 December, so can the Minister explain how the decision to restrict the Bill for this purpose was made? What implications does it have for the role of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who has direct responsibility for upholding the human rights of the people of Northern Ireland? Can the Minister explain why migrant women and those on low incomes in abusive relationships should pay such a price?

Can the Minister stop hiding behind devolution and say sorry to Sarah Ewart for making her relive the trauma of what happened to her, just because the Government need the 10 votes of the DUP to stay in power? We saw that last night, and I have no doubt that we will see it again, but this Bill shows the human consequences for women across the UK of the confidence and supply arrangement.

I know that Members across the House want to see action on domestic violence, and these restrictions will trouble women only our in constituencies but across the whole UK. Given that this is a draft Bill, will the Minister commit to going back to the drawing board and coming in with a Bill that helps to protect every victim across the UK? I ask the Minister to fight us fair and square on abortion rights in this place, not through backroom deals and bargaining. Otherwise, it will take
a rape victim having to come to court to make the Government do the right thing and not block this change. Put DV, not the DUP, first.

Victoria Atkins: Home should be a place of safety and love, and yet for 2 million people in this country a year, that is not the case. That is why we are introducing this unprecedented Bill, to try to help the victims of domestic abuse.

The hon. Lady rightly highlighted the fact that the Bill applies only to England and Wales at the moment. I set out the reason for that in my initial statement: the raft of offences that would support prosecutions of domestic abuse, including section 18 GBH and coercive and controlling behaviour, are devolved.

We have not rested on our laurels. I have written to the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Department of Justice to ask whether they will replicate this legislation in their own territories. I am delighted to say that the Scottish Government are looking at their own measures. I am sure that Scottish National party Members will have their own thoughts on devolved matters and the UK Parliament respecting that.

I must bring the hon. Lady back to the central subject of the Bill. This is about tackling domestic abuse, which I know she and many Members across the House feel strongly about. We must focus on the Bill. Let us not throw taunts across the Floor of the House. Let us work together to ensure that the Bill is in a good state when it is introduced formally. She asked about scrutiny of the Bill. We have said from the very beginning that this is a draft piece of legislation that will be scrutinised by a Joint Committee of both Houses. We anticipate that taking about 12 weeks, and once the Committee has produced its recommendations, we will look at those carefully before introducing the Bill.

Whatever the hon. Lady may have read on Sunday, I urge her not to believe everything she reads in the papers. We have to remember the people whom we are trying to help through the Bill. I have been delighted at the cross-party consensus on the Bill. Let us work together to stop this cycle of violence and help the victims of domestic abuse.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I highly commend the Minister and the Government for this very good Bill, but I very much share the concerns of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I am gravely concerned that this is, in effect, a way of stopping what should be happening: a fundamental reform of the laws in Northern Ireland so that women in Northern Ireland have exactly the same rights as women in my constituency. Forgive me, Mr Speaker, for asking the Minister this, but I genuinely do not know the answer: are there any civil remedies available to protect victims in domestic abuse protection orders. They apply across the courts—family, civil and criminal courts. My understanding does not accord with hers, but I am happy to take that issue away.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): As a Welsh MP, I have every confidence that the Welsh Labour Government are working towards delivering an excellent strategy on support for victims of domestic violence—I have no doubt that the same is true in Scotland. I totally respect the concept of devolution—when it works. But with the absence of Stormont, victims in Northern Ireland will see the progress in other parts of the UK only as further evidence of where they are falling behind in the support services and legislation available to them. We already know that in Northern Ireland they have no coercive control law and no stalking law, and the current controversy over the legality of abortion rumbles on. We need the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to take firmer action so that we can see a return to devolved government.

The good people of Northern Ireland deserve the same rights as everybody else in the UK, and currently they are not getting that. They are not protected by a devolved Government because of Stormont’s suspension. Even in today’s Northern Ireland questions we have been calling for the return of devolved institutions. We believe that support and services for victims of domestic violence in Northern Ireland are best made in Northern Ireland, but after two years of no Government the situation is stagnant. The people of Northern Ireland are suffering the effects of this political hiatus, none more so than the victims of domestic violence, as their voices reverberate in an echo chamber. I know that no MP in this place would believe that policies and strategies that support our constituents should not be afforded to the people of Northern Ireland, with one of the most notable issues being that of abortion. Human rights issues are not devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive and, as such, issues around women’s reproductive health are the responsibility of this Home Secretary and other relevant Ministers. Decisions on the provision of public services, legislation and support for the people of Northern Ireland need to be reached urgently. If there is no likelihood of Stormont reconvening very shortly, this Government need to take responsibility to protect and support victims of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland.

Victoria Atkins: As always, I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. Indeed, I should call her my hon. Friend, as she and I are agreeing furiously on the hope and aspiration that those who can make a difference and express the wishes of the residents of Northern Ireland—I hope we can all accept that they may not agree with our individual viewpoints on issues such as abortion, but that is why that topic is devolved—will get back round the table to sort this issue, as well as many others. I am sure we all encourage them in that, as I know she does. I gently remind colleagues again that this is about domestic abuse. Although, sadly, some abortions may be as a result of an intimate abusive relationship, not all abortions
fall into that category, and I am keen that we try to focus on the victims of domestic abuse in this Bill and our scrutiny of this Bill, because they are the people we really are trying to help with the passing of this piece of legislation.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Let us call this out for what it is: part of an orchestrated campaign to alter abortion laws in Northern Ireland and here, and to replace those laws with extreme proposals for which there is no public appetite whatsoever. Does the Minister agree that it is highly inappropriate for such campaigners to hijack the Domestic Abuse Bill in this way, undermining a Bill to support victims of domestic abuse and their families? Does she agree that it is equally inappropriate to interfere in a devolved matter, one that has been devolved for almost 100 years, and set a dangerous constitutional precedent—a precedent of interference that would undermine the Good Friday agreement itself?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, which underlines that we have to keep in mind the subject matter of this Bill; we are trying to tackle domestic abuse here.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The situation in Northern Ireland as regards women’s rights, particularly on abortion, is deplorable and requires addressing. However, this Bill could never have been UK-wide, because civil and criminal justice are devolved to Scotland. Indeed, last year Scotland passed its own Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, which has already significantly strengthened statutory definitions and protections in respect of domestic violence, for example, by recognising the offence of coercive control.

There is much to be welcomed in the UK Government’s Bill, but I am pleased to hear that they are putting it through pre-legislative scrutiny, which we hope signifies that they are willing to listen to genuine concerns from Members from across the House. There are some UK-wide issues that this Government could and should legislate on. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has led the campaign calling for default separate payments in universal credit, to protect the victims of domestic abuse from financial coercion. Scottish National party Members were dismayed that that was dismissed out of hand by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Will the Minister speak to her counterpart at the Department for Work and Pensions so as to urgently introduce default separate payments or at least to create provision for the Scottish Government to do that, because of course that is one of the many aspects of welfare powers that are not yet devolved?

As has been mentioned by others, the insecure immigration status of women who are victims of domestic violence also needs addressing. I want to know what the Minister is doing to extend the eligibility of the destitute domestic violence concession, so that it supports more migrant women. More generally, what discussions will she have with her counterparts to support migrant women, throughout the UK, who are victims of domestic abuse?

Victoria Atkins: I am very grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for her astute and concise analysis of the legal position. May I put on the record the UK Government’s thanks to the Scottish Government for the work they do with us on this and other associated crimes, such as stalking and harassment?

The hon. and learned Lady is absolutely right. I hope the House realises that we are being very open and transparent about the process for this Bill. It is a draft Bill specifically so that there can be a Joint Committee of both Houses—I think it is fair to say that this is an unusual level of scrutiny for the House—to look at the detail of the Bill and see whether improvements can be made.

On the specific issue of universal credit, I very much know about the issues that have been raised on these Benches. There is already a range of special provisions for victims of domestic abuse—for example, temporary accommodation, easements, same-day advances and signposting to expert support. However, I welcome the recent measures introduced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions regarding payments to the primary carer.

We will continue to work on this together, but I would make this observation. Those of us who take a particular interest in this subject all know that economic abuse, like all forms of domestic abuse, has no regard to income levels, job status or whatever. We must make sure that our answers are right not just for those on low incomes, but for women who do not need to have recourse to the welfare system.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I echo the words of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), in agreeing that there is a democratic deficit in Northern Ireland at the moment. In Northern Ireland questions this morning, we heard that there is currently no mental capacity legislation in Northern Ireland. In our Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, we have heard that it is still working to statements, rather than to education, health and care plans. The suicide strategy is sitting there but cannot be implemented, and we have the issue of equal marriage. This is much bigger than the Bill, and just to change the Bill to deal with one issue undervalues the role of devolution. The priority must be to get the Assembly back and functioning in Northern Ireland and dealing with all the inequality issues that are so important to the people in all communities.

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for setting out the political complexities of this, but also the impacts on people living in Northern Ireland. Again, I am not sure we can solve the issue of devolved politics in Northern Ireland on the Floor of the House during this urgent question. However, we have contacted the permanent secretary who is currently acting in a temporary capacity in relation to Northern Ireland, because we want to see what can be done to help women in Northern Ireland as well as in England and Wales.
Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have a great deal of time for the Minister, but what does she really think about how long it is acceptable to use the problem of there being no Assembly in Northern Ireland as a reason for this House not to act on the breach of women’s human rights in Northern Ireland, which we have debated at length in this Chamber? I would be interested to know what the Minister has to say about that.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady, and I note her campaign on the particular issue of abortion and the decriminalisation of the law regarding abortion. At the risk of overreaching myself, I am not sure it is my place at the Dispatch Box at this time to give an assessment of how long this is taking, other than to say that the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and everyone in this Government are very keen and we urge all those parties present in Northern Ireland to get back around the table. There are so many issues that need their attention.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): May I ask my hon. Friend to confirm two things? First, is she committed and determined to tackle domestic abuse in all its forms? Secondly, is she determined to improve rights and protections for women across the United Kingdom?

Victoria Atkins: As this Bill passes through pre-legislative scrutiny, but also through this House and the other place, I hope the message will go out to people who are not perhaps as passionate about tackling domestic abuse and those for whom it has not yet become a priority that domestic abuse is not restricted to acts of violence, but can encompass sexual abuse, coercive and controlling behaviour, and economic abuse. Interestingly, since we launched the draft Bill last week, I have been inundated with emails from victims of all different forms of domestic abuse seeking help and thanking me for recognising the hell they are going through. If every Member can help us to inform and educate people about the forms of hell they are going through. If every Member can help us to inform and educate people about the forms of domestic abuse, that in itself will be incredibly powerful to us in helping victims.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My party, the Democratic Unionist party, recognises the importance of tackling domestic abuse and of supporting victims of domestic violence. However, this is a devolved issue in Northern Ireland, and the need to strengthen the legislation should be dealt with by the Northern Ireland Assembly. If the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) was to amend the Bill to change the law on abortion in Northern Ireland, this would breach the devolution settlement. The emphasis should be, must be and has to be to restore devolved Government in Northern Ireland. The Government and all Members of this House on both sides of the Chamber should respect the right of the people of Northern Ireland to deal with these matters through their elected Assembly.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman of course speaks for his constituency, and I am pleased to hear that he is urging others in Northern Ireland to get back around the table and help to deal with these many issues. As has already been pointed out, however, this is but one of the important issues facing Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): May I thank the Minister for this Bill, which I believe will transform the way in which we deal with this horrific crime? It largely impacts on women, although men can of course be impacted by domestic violence as well. I think it is totally despicable that politicians in Northern Ireland have left such a void in this and other areas for two years now. Will the Minister confirm that the devolved powers, which mean that this Bill has to be only for England and Wales, have actually been devolved for many decades?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am particularly grateful to her for pointing out that, although the vast majority of victims are female—indeed, of the 2 million people affected, it is estimated that 1.3 million are female—men can be victims of domestic abuse as well. That is why, through the non-legislative package of measures that sits alongside the Bill, we are also investing in, for example, a specific helpline for male victims. We understand that they face particular stigmas in being a male victim, and they may feel even greater pressure not to seek help.

On the point about the nature of the criminal laws underpinning the prosecution of domestic abuse offences, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Section 18 of the Offences Against the Person Act dates back to 1861.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): When Ireland was part of the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call Jess Phillips.

Jess Phillips: I would just like to point out that in 1861 there was no devolution—the whole of Ireland was part of the UK—so things have somewhat moved on since 1861. Anyway, that was not my question, Mr Speaker; it was just an indulgence.

I am going to ask about domestic abuse. Specifically, why does the Bill in its current form—I accept that it may well change, and I will certainly be seeking to change it—not have any immigration statutory law changes in it to protect migrant women? I know that throughout the consultation there was a very strong push on how this Bill will not help any women unless it helps all women. We have to leave no woman behind, and currently migrant women are left behind by this Bill. If we extend it to cover immigration law, the extent of the Bill will of course be expanded. Would the Minister welcome that?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady, who needs no introduction in terms of her experience and expertise in this area. On expanding the Bill to alter the immigration status, the view was taken that, although domestic abuse does, of course, affect women who are not British citizens, or who do not have the right to remain, the Bill as a whole must focus on victims, the types of abuse and how we treat abuse.

I very much welcome the hon. Lady’s wish to assist—[Interruption.] I am sorry—I am trying to keep a straight face; the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is gesticulating wildly from a sedentary position. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips)
knows that I will welcome her contributions during the scrutiny process—indeed, I hope that she will be involved in it.

I note that various provisions are in place to help women who, for example, have come across on a spousal visa, but both the Minister for Immigration and I are very alert to the challenges that those women face, and we are very keen to work with the hon. Lady.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I agree that Northern Ireland must get its political system up and running to tackle these really serious issues. I welcome the draft Bill. It is such an important step in tackling domestic abuse, particularly areas that have not been tackled previously—for example, controlling behaviour towards the elderly. I wonder whether the Minister could put the whole thing in perspective, so that we can really understand how important the Bill is. How many people does she think will be helped by the Bill in all its forms?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right to draw attention to elder abuse. The number of colleagues and other people who have contacted me since the launch of the draft Bill to tell me their stories of abuse by their children or grandchildren is heartbreaking. Several months ago, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) called a very important Westminster Hall debate on abuse by children of their parents and grandparents.

It is something that we are keen to uncover and shine a light on, because if a parent is being abused by their child, the stigma and shame that victims unfortunately and wrongly feel is compounded even more, because parents feel that they should be able to control the behaviour of their children. We want to shine a light on that, and say to everyone, whether they are parents, children or grandchildren, “Abuse in your home is not right, and we are here to help.”

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Minister failed to answer the central question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). Who decided to exclude Northern Ireland from the Bill?

Victoria Atkins: As the hon. Lady knows, the process is that any Bill that is introduced has to go through various Government committees to ensure, across Government, that we have collective responsibility, that it meets with approval. I do not know of any such meetings with the DUP. I will happily take that away, but as far as I am concerned, I looked at the Bill, I have examined it very carefully, and I am afraid that the central point about devolved matters seems to me to apply.

I know that that does not meet with the hon. Lady’s approval, but the fact is that the law is the law, and we have to build a Bill around it. As I say, I have written to the devolved Assembly in Scotland and to the permanent secretary in Northern Ireland, and those communications are ongoing.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Supreme Court judgment made it absolutely clear that lawmakers would have to change the law to give greater rights to women from Northern Ireland in the circumstances that were discussed. The women who my colleagues and I met and women such as Sarah Ewart should not have to go all the way through a court process to get their rights—it adds insult to injury for them. I ask the Minister, who always listens: if not this law, what law will be introduced by this Parliament, which unlike Northern Ireland is responsible for treaty compliance, to give those rights to women, who deserve them?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I know that he works on a wide range of issues tackling violence against women and girls. First, on the case that he referred to—I do not want to be legalistic about this, but he asked me about it specifically—he may recall that the Supreme Court judgment was unable to deliver a full ruling, because the litigant bringing the proceedings was not judged to have locus. I have to say that, because that is the situation.

I obviously must not comment on the specific case that has been referred to in the Chamber and that is going through the court process at the moment, but I return to the point that the Bill is about domestic abuse. We have to focus on the subject matter of the title of the Bill, and any matters in relation to devolved powers are part of a much wider debate across Government.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome, as I am sure others do, the Minister’s obvious passion and commitment to tackling domestic abuse, which I think is the central issue for all of us present. I also believe passionately in devolution, but devolution means to transfer, or delegate, power to another body. That body at the moment does not exist. Devolution does not mean to abrogate responsibility.

Those women are citizens of the United Kingdom, and the United Kingdom Government surely have a responsibility to respect the views expressed by our Supreme Court and the United Nations that the human rights of women in Northern Ireland are not being protected. Does the Minister not agree that that should be the overriding principle, not whether devolution, which is not working at the moment, should be preserved?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind comments. She has perhaps recognised the situation in which we find ourselves, in that these matters have been devolved. I go back to the point that the criminal laws that underpin the prosecution of domestic abuse, and those are devolved. As we have heard, that does not have an impact only in relation to domestic abuse; a wide range of measures are affected by the Assembly not yet being able to be convened in Northern Ireland. I am sorry that it will not meet with the hon. Lady’s approval, but the only answer that I can give is yet again to urge those who can make a difference in Northern Ireland to please get back round the table and start talking to each other.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): Although I welcome the inclusion in the Bill of financial abuse as a type of domestic abuse, it is not enough to have that simply as words when Government policy is trapping women in financially abusive relationships. Universal credit payments must be automatically split. Charities have said that not having automatically split payments gives a hand to abusers. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) did not quite get a straight
answer. Will the Minister recognise the problem, and meet her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to urge that universal credit payments be split?

Victoria Atkins: If I may just correct the hon. Lady, we are not talking about financial abuse; we talk about economic abuse, because we appreciate that abuse can take many forms—for example, preventing access to food cupboards in the kitchen, taking a woman’s mobile phone away, so who she can contact is restricted, and even hiding the car keys, so that she cannot get to work on time in the morning, which puts her employment at risk, with all the ramifications that that can have.

On the point about universal credit, I am in constant dialogue with my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is formerly of the Home Office manor. I very much hope that the fact that one of her first announcements was an important one about looking after primary carers gives reassurance and comfort to the House that we are looking at this matter very carefully.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Criminal justice is not yet devolved to Wales, but I draw attention to, and commend, the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015, which came into force in Wales in 2015. The 2018 progress report raises concern about the lack of collaboration and integration between the devolved and non-devolved organisations charged with taking forward the aims of the Act. What discussions has the Minister had with the Minister responsible in the Welsh Government to address that?

Victoria Atkins: I am very concerned to hear that, not least because I visited Cardiff a few months ago, as part of our domestic abuse consultation engagement events, to listen to people who are doing great work in Wales to tackle domestic abuse and to see how we can improve collaboration. I very much take on board what the hon. Lady says. If we need to improve, I hope she knows that I will not rest until that has happened.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s response today. I also welcome the support from the Scottish National party, in particular the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), with regards to women in Northern Ireland. The Minister said that the criminal elements are devolved, but the Supreme Court’s warning from last year is that human rights are not devolved but extended. Is this not a missed opportunity to empower the Minister and the Secretary of State at the Home Office with regard to the human rights of victims of domestic violence and of women in general?

Victoria Atkins: I absolutely understand the hon. Gentleman’s feelings and his reasons for raising that point. At the risk of being legalistic, the Supreme Court judgment was advisory because of the locus. I hope he appreciates that I cannot talk about the case going through the court process at the moment. When that judgment is delivered we will of course look at it very carefully, but I come back to the point that at the moment, on this and on a whole range of issues, domestic abuse is devolved. I gently remind the House, by way of explanation, that the topic of the Bill is domestic abuse and that not every abortion is as a result of domestic abuse.

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I would like to start by saying to the Minister that unless she is going to devolve Department for Work and Pensions and UK Visas and Immigration functions, it will be a missed opportunity for the Bill not to tackle the issues those Departments are responsible for, particularly with regards to women in the immigration system and some DWP policies, including the rape clause, which, in the way it is formed, either forces a woman to leave an abusive relationship at a time not of her choosing, which can be extremely dangerous, or denies her support.

I would also like to know a bit more about the recommendations for training DWP staff. I have heard from some organisations that that can be sorely lacking in the advice that is offered to women. I would like to know how exactly that would operate for both England and Scotland.

Lastly, if Mr Speaker will allow, it was announced today that all judges and sheriffs in Scotland will be given specific domestic violence training, particularly around coercive control. Will she consider doing something similar for all judges in the English court system, too?

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Lady can be satisfied that she has provided comprehensive coverage of her concerns, to which, doubtless, there will be an equally comprehensive response from the Minister on the Treasury Bench.

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. First, I thank the hon. Lady for pointing to the fact that the draft Bill, important though it is, is not the only action that the Government are taking to tackle domestic abuse. Indeed, there are some 120 commitments that sit alongside the Bill. She mentioned training. That is a crucial part of our package, not just for DWP or jobcentre workers but across what I would call the frontline, for example housing association officers, police officers and the judiciary. The judiciary in England and Wales already receive training, which we keep under review. I should also say that we are looking at the offence of coercive control and behaviour. It has been in force for three years, but we appreciate that it can be a very difficult offence to investigate and prosecute. We are reviewing it to ensure that it is as effective as possible. On the DWP more generally, I am in conversation with my counterparts there. We want a wraparound approach, which is why the announcement by the Secretary of State was so significant.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Like many Members from across this place, I am very enthusiastic about the Bill and the potential for making a real difference in our communities. That is why it is so disappointing that we are not even at the first hurdle and we are already divided. I have worked very constructively with the Minister on a number of issues, so it gives me no pleasure to ask this question but I feel that I must. When the decision was made to not put things in the Bill such as migration and welfare, therefore allowing the Government to restrict their territorial scope to just England and Wales, was it based on the best interests of women in the United Kingdom or was it a narrow political judgment?
Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Indeed, I find myself being held to account by him in pretty much all of my portfolio. On the territory of the Bill, I draw the attention of hon. Members to the consultation that was launched last year. At that point, the consultation’s scope was England and Wales. I would not want hon. Members to leave the Chamber thinking there has been some kind of handbrake turn in relation to the territorial decisions made for the Bill. The fact is that this is a devolved matter. That is why I have written to the devolved Government in Scotland and our Northern Irish counterparts to see if we can reach an agreement on whether they want to implement the measures too. I hope he understands that my motivation all along has been to help the victims of domestic abuse not just today, or for the victims I could not help when I was prosecuting in the criminal courts 15 years ago because none of these measures were anywhere near coming into being, but the victims in the future. We all know the impact domestic abuse can have on children growing up in abusive households and we need to break that cycle of violence.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Earlier, an hon. Member said that there were no devolved institutions in Ireland in 1861. Of course, in 1840, under Daniel O’Connell, the first home rule movement commenced and in 1861 the second movement was well under way, leading to devolution and the creation of two Parliaments in Ireland. I think it is important to have that on the record.

It is unfortunate that some Members have tried to conflate a very important domestic abuse Bill here in England and Wales, which we will support, with what is happening in a very confusing situation in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that that confusion means we have a strange arrangement whereby at one moment in this Parliament some Members talk about protecting absolutely the integrity of the Belfast agreement when it comes to some matters that we discuss, namely Europe, but that when we move on to domestic arrangements that are specifically devolved under the terms of the Belfast agreement we can suddenly cast those arrangements aside? That confusion has to go. We either accept devolution and implement it, or we do what the Labour Front Bench seems to be saying and introduce direct rule.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his history lesson on Ireland and Northern Ireland. He makes the point eloquently that we cannot pick and choose between devolved matters. The mention of the Good Friday agreement reminds us all, if we need reminding, about the particular sensitivities in Northern Ireland, how we have reached where we are today and its broad history. We of course very much hope that those who can get around the table will do so, so we can sort out those and other matters.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Was the Bill vetted by the Cabinet Office in relation to the confidence and supply agreement?

Victoria Atkins: I do not understand what the hon. Gentleman is trying to get to. I have already said that the Bill, like every piece of proposed legislation, has to go through what is called “write round”. That is where every Government Department, including the Cabinet Office, considers a Bill. I am very conscious of my responsibility as the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office and that we share the Bill with the Ministry of Justice. That is how the Bill has been developed. The consultation last year was clear in its scope and we are bringing the Bill forward in good faith.
Points of Order

1.39 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for not giving you advance notice of this; it just came to me. If the Domestic Abuse Bill relates just to England and Wales, can I clarify that the rules of English votes for English laws will apply, and that Members from Scotland and Northern Ireland will not be invited to vote on anything to do with it?

Mr Speaker: It would be somewhat premature of me to offer a judgment from the Chair on that matter at this time. Certainly, when legislation is potentially open to such designation, it is the normal practice that I am advised on it, that I see the paperwork relating to it and that a view is formed. That is something of a holding response, but the matter will clearly be live.

It is, of course, a draft Bill and will be considered by a Committee. It seems unimaginable that that point will not be further explored, both during consideration by the Committee and subsequently. The hon. Lady is herself a living testimony to the truth of what I have just said. It is unimaginable that it will not be the subject of further discussion and questioning, and therefore there will be a requirement for a ministerial response. I should say, as much for the benefit of people attending our proceedings as for Members in the Chamber, that the very fact that I granted an urgent question on it—I think it is the 550th urgent question—is testament to the fact that I regard it as a matter that warrants the attention of the House and the response of a Minister in the Chamber.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I notified you earlier about the point of order that I seek to make, as I did the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). Yesterday in Treasury questions, the hon. Lady indicated that she had received correspondence from a constituent. That is fine; we all respond to constituents. The quotation that she cited, which relates to a bomb that went off in Ireland will not be invited to vote on anything to do with it?

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I too thank the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) for advance notice of his point of order. I hope he will respect the fact that yesterday I quoted verbatim from a constituent of mine who works and is an employer in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency in Northern Ireland, and has spent extensive time there over several years. It was not conjecture, but a report of reality on the ground.

Responsibility for individual despicable acts of violence clearly rests squarely with the perpetrator, but after 30 years of the troubles, peace in Northern Ireland was painstakingly negotiated through the Good Friday agreement. My constituent has been raising concerns with me for several months about escalating tensions in the community in Londonderry where his business is based. Those issues and the impact that Brexit is already having on the fragile and complex situation in Northern Ireland have been reported widely, but there has been very little discussion of them in this Chamber. They are of an order of magnitude that demands that they be raised. If the Democratic Unionist party will not raise them, I will do so where I have cause to do so via my constituents.

The Prime Minister has so far failed to give any details of alternative arrangements for the Irish border to provide reassurance that a frictionless border without infrastructure is possible—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have indulged the hon. Lady, who always addresses the House with great courtesy. I hope she will forgive me. She is very forensic, but she was reading out what amounted to a speech on this matter. It therefore strains credulity to suppose that it could be characterised as a point of order. I normally have no wish to cut her off. She has made her point with considerable force and insistence—[Interruption.] And she enjoys the benefit of the endorsement of her right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who has just observed from a sedentary position that she made her point very well. I suspect that her cup runneth over, and I think she should leave it there.
The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I rise to support your comment that political discourse of course produces different points of view. Speculation in this House on live intelligence actions and investigations is unhelpful and rarely reflects the facts. All Members should be cautious about entering into sub judice or live investigations with speculation that can add fuel to the fire.

Mr Speaker: Everybody should be responsible in his or her use of language. I can say only, however, that although I am not unmindful of the Minister’s point, no breach of order has taken place. We will leave it there. He has made his point with some force, and I do not think there is any need for me to add to it.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I have got a feeling that the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) thinks that the House needs to hear him. Therefore, we will have a point of order from Mr Mark Francois.

Mr Francois: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for not giving you notice of this, but it is a very straightforward matter. I had a meeting earlier this month with Mr Andrew Haines, the chief executive of Network Rail, to discuss the delay in completing engineering works on the Southend Victoria to Liverpool Street line, which is vexing my constituents greatly. Network Rail representatives briefed me on a new plan to shorten the works, which was welcome. I then went on the media and explained what would happen in good faith. The following Monday, Network Rail contacted me and said, “I’m terribly sorry. We got that slightly wrong,” and then changed what they had offered. I think that was a genuine mistake, but they promised to write to me by the end of the month to clarify the matter. There are two days to go, and no letter has been received. Do you agree that if they give a guarantee like that, Mr Speaker, it would be a good idea to keep it?

Mr Speaker: It would be a very good idea to keep it as a matter of principle. Moreover, as the right hon. Gentleman has aired the issue in the Chamber, that seems to me to constitute an additional reason why it would be politic or prudent for that letter of response to be provided.

The right hon. Gentleman probably recalls that the late Sir Gerald Kaufman was much given to tabling questions about when he would receive a reply to a letter he had sent or a question he had posed. He was wont to observe that, shortly after tabling said question, the reply—to a letter or question from some considerable period earlier—seemed miraculously and speedily to arrive.

If that chief executive were here, I would say to him—he is not, so I cannot, but I will say it indirectly—that I remember what a persistent fellow the right hon. Gentleman probably recalls that the late Sir Gerald Kaufman was much given to tabling questions about when he would receive a reply to a letter he had sent or a question he had posed. He was wont to observe that, shortly after tabling said question, the reply—to a letter or question from some considerable period earlier—seemed miraculously and speedily to arrive.

If that chief executive were here, I would say to him—he is not, so I cannot, but I will say it indirectly—that I remember what a persistent fellow the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford was in 1986, when he stood against me in a student election. He was a very dedicated campaigner, although he was unsuccessful on that occasion. It would be altogether wiser for the chief executive to recognise that of one thing he can be certain: the right hon. Gentleman will not go away. He will just become ever more demanding, and so that letter should arrive sooner rather than later.
European Union (Requirements Relating to Withdrawal)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.50 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish requirements in connection to the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union.

We do not have the luxury of time. Unless an alternative is in place, in 58 days—just 29 sitting days—we will leave the EU with no deal. My Bill looks ahead to what happens if, as looks likely, the Prime Minister returns empty-handed from her mission impossible to Brussels, and is based on the recommendations of the 11th report of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, so I start by paying tribute to its Chair, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and all its members for that excellent report.

The Prime Minister has repeatedly commented that, while the House has said what it does not want, it needs to decide what it does. In the event of there being no agreement to change the backstop, we will be back to square one, but with one important difference: we will be much nearer the no-deal cliff edge. In a nutshell, my Bill would allow the House to express its view on what could command the support of the House through a serious of indicative votes on free-standing motions, and the Committee recommended that those be taken in order.

The motions would give the House an opportunity to vote first on the Prime Minister’s negotiated withdrawal agreement and framework for the future relationship; secondly, on the option of leaving with no deal; thirdly, to instruct the Government to seek changes to the backstop—although I think by then we would have tested that to destruction; fourthly, to instruct the Government to seek a Canada-style deal, as set out in the report; fifthly, on seeking to join the European economic area through the pillar of the European Free Trade Association and remain in a customs union with the EU, or a variation of it; and finally, to return the decision to the British people by giving them the opportunity to decide in a public vote what kind of Brexit deal they want or whether they wish to remain in the EU on the current deal.

Last night, the House gave two instructions to the Government. Not for the first time, it rejected leaving the EU with no deal, but it also passed an amendment unilaterally requiring that the Northern Ireland backstop be replaced by unspecified “alternative arrangements” to avoid a hard border. It adds up, essentially, to tearing up the withdrawal agreement. Donald Tusk in his statement following the vote has made it clear that the backstop is part of the withdrawal agreement and that the withdrawal agreement is not open for renegotiation. Most people do not seriously feel that the EU will be prepared to renegotiate.

In the absence of meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement, it is hard to see how the Government will secure support for a deal that we rejected so comprehensively, by a margin of 230 votes. If my Bill went ahead, the House would have the opportunity to express its view on where the Prime Minister should go from here by giving it the opportunity not only to reject no deal but to consider other alternatives.

I want to be clear about why the House rejected no deal. No Government could seriously, knowingly and deliberately inflict such pain on their people. We are talking about changes not just to the economy but to livelihoods and jobs. It is the real world crashing into Brexit fantasy. It would affect not only our economy but many other sectors, including health, transport links, security, food and farming—the list is very long. No responsible Government could inflict that kind of pain, but unfortunately, up until now, the Prime Minister has given the House a binary choice: “My deal or no deal.” My Bill would allow the House to say there are other routes forward.

Some colleagues want to press forward with an EEA-EFTA arrangement and a customs union, while others would prefer a Canada-style arrangement. We should all have the opportunity to vote on the way forward. I and many of my colleagues have made it clear we favour returning the decision to the British people to give them the final say. The problem with the original referendum was that it did not set out which of these many options the public were voting for. Once we know that decision, we will see that it is far removed from the sunlit uplands promised during the referendum campaign.

We need to seek the informed, valid consent of the British people; otherwise, we are pressing forward with a deal that commands the respect of neither leavers nor remainers. Nobody could realistically claim it is the will of the people, but if we give it back to the people and tell them exactly what is involved, so that they can weigh up the risks and benefits themselves, we will get that informed, valid consent, and then we could proceed together.

It is quite possible that the British people would decide to proceed with Brexit—I accept that—and they would need the absolute guarantee that it would then be acted on as quickly as possible, but a second vote would also allow them to change their minds. Everybody deserves the opportunity to change their mind. Even our first Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has famously commented that if people cannot change their minds in a democracy, it ceases to be a democracy.

I reject the notion sometimes put forward that it would be a betrayal of democracy to ask people again, and I particularly object to the assertion that it would cause civil unrest. We need to stop talking that up. Since when did this House bow or cave in to the concerns and demands of the far right? We should be standing up to them and making it absolutely clear that democracy does not stand still, and should never stand still, and that this House has a duty to give the public the right to vote and have the final say.

We must recognise that this call comes not from the EU but from the people—the hundreds of thousands of people who marched through the streets of London in the summer and the many hundreds of thousands beyond that who did not make it here but who have written to us and campaigned for the right to have the final say in a people’s vote. The House owes it to them to debate and vote on that as part of a series of indicative votes, and I commend the Bill to the House.
Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I rise to oppose the Bill.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston)—for whom I have the deepest respect—I voted in the referendum to remain, but in my constituency, as in hers, a majority voted to leave. It seemed to me, as a democrat and as one who had voted for a referendum to be held in 2016, that as 17.5 million people—a majority—had voted in the referendum to leave the European Union, we must respect that result. And so, from that day onwards, I made it plain that I would do everything I could to ensure that the people’s vote was respected and that we executed the instructions that we had been given.

We need to be clear: the people of this country did not vote to remain. They voted to leave, which is why we must take “no Brexit” off the table. A second referendum asking people to choose between the Prime Minister’s deal and remaining would load the question in a way that would be entirely wrong and entirely unacceptable, and I think that it would be a travesty of our democracy.

Let me explain why I originally backed remain. I did so because I thought that a big project like Brexit would be very difficult for Britain. If we could not manage a basic patient record system in the NHS, what hope did we have with a really huge project like Brexit? I feared that Members of Parliament would think that their constituents might have been very clever to elect them but were not so able to make a big decision like the decision to leave the European Union. I also feared that they might not accept that decision but fight it all the way. I worried that our civil society was not strong enough. I worried that our machinery of government would blow a fuse in trying to manage a project of this sort, and in that I have not been disappointed.

The vote having taken place, however, I thought that we must respect the result. I put my shoulder to the wheel and thought about how we could be ready on day one, deal or no deal. I thought about how we could make sure that this was a success. I thought about how we did not have to hand over all the money that the EU wanted, and the EU had no legal right to demand it. I thought about how to make the best negotiating case for our country. The worst negotiating case for our country is to rule out no deal. If the other side knows that you will not get up and walk away from the table, they know that they have got you, and if they have got you, they are going to give you a really rubbish deal, so the best way in which we can get a good deal is to be prepared and ready on day one not to do a deal.

Now, what have we seen? We have seen the people who do not want us to leave the European Union finance their campaign for a second referendum with foreign money. We have seen their spokesman from Davos telling us how we should lead our lives, and how we should not leave at all. They want a loaded question, and—this is what I think is really wrong—they try to frighten people by telling them that they will die of thirst because our water will be poisoned, that they will die of starvation because no food will arrive, that our pets will die in quarantine and that our planes will never take off. That kind of irresponsible talk is what makes people so angry. They say that the establishment should be working to solve those problems and to ensure that we are thoroughly ready—not trying to scare us, not trying to tell us how bad the economy will be, but trying to make this work and to make a success of it.

So often, these “Project Fear” stories lose credibility. In my constituency, people shake their heads and say, “This is not credible.” I do not think that “Project Fear” is right, and I think it irresponsible. However, I do not subscribe to “Project Pangloss”, according to which it will all be a walk in the park. I think that if we left without a deal, there would be bumps in the road and that some of those bumps could be quite jarring, and we should be honest and open about that. However, I do not think we should try to frighten people. I do not think we should try to tell people that they were stupid. I do not think we should try to tell them that they did not know what they were doing. I do not think we should try to tell them that they did not have informed consent, or that they were too stupid in 2016 to know which way to vote.

I think that people had made up their minds about the European Union over many years and that they knew exactly what they were concerned about. When the question was put to them, they made their decision, and I strongly suspect that if they were asked again, they would make the same decision. They would say, “The establishment are not listening to us, so we will tell them again”—and they would. Worse than that, they would say, “To reverse the decision and turn our country around by 180 degrees would make our country a laughing stock across the world.” That is why I think that a second referendum people would vote to leave by an even greater majority.

The real travesty is this. Were we to hold a second referendum, we would have endless Brexit, endless uncertainty. The key message that my constituents convey to me every day is, “Look, deal or no deal, let us just get on with it, put it in place, move on to the other things that concern us—jobs, money, schools, hospitals, and how we can build a better Britain for the future—and stop banging on about Brexit.”

Question put (Standing Order No. 23) and agreed to. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: I wish the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) well in recovering from his indisposition.

Ordered.

That Dr Sarah Wollaston, Mr Kenneth Clarke, Hilary Benn, Joanna Cherry, Mr Dominic Grieve, Luciana Berger, Anna Soubry, Chuka Umunna, Dr Philip Lee, Heidi Allen, Mr Ben Bradshaw and Guto Bebb present the Bill.

Dr Sarah Wollaston accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed (Bill 328).
Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1


(1) Section 52 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (interception of communications in accordance with overseas requests) is amended as follows:

(2) In subsection (3), at the end insert “(see further subsections (6) and (7))”.

(3) After subsection (5) insert—

“(6) Subsection (7) applies where an international agreement provides for requests for the interception of a communication to be made by the competent authorities of a country or territory, or of more than one country or territory, in which a person found guilty of a criminal offence may be sentenced to death for the offence under the general criminal law of the country or territory concerned.

Such an offence is referred to in subsection (7) as a “death penalty offence”.

(7) Where this subsection applies, the Secretary of State may not designate the agreement as a relevant international agreement unless the Secretary of State has sought, in respect of each country or territory referred to in subsection (6), a written assurance, or written assurances, relating to the non-use of information obtained by virtue of the agreement in connection with proceedings for a death penalty offence in the country or territory.

(Brought up, and read the First time.

2.7 pm

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 1, in clause 1, page 1, line 19, at end insert—

‘(4A) The Secretary of State may not make regulations designating an international co-operation agreement providing for the use of—

(a) section 52 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (interception in accordance with overseas requests), or

(b) any other enactment which provides for the collection of electronic data,

unless the condition in subsection 4B is met.

(4B) The condition is that the states party to or participating in the international co-operation agreement have given assurances that the death penalty will not be imposed in any case in which or in whose preparation the intercepted communication or electronic data obtained under this Act has been used.’

This amendment would prohibit the Government from entering into a treaty for the provision of intercepted communication or electronic data without securing assurances that the death penalty will not be imposed in cases where that data is used.
Government amendments 4 to 6 and 19.

Amendment 16, in clause 12, page 10, line 11, leave out
“that is confidential journalistic data”

This amendment would require notice to be given of an application for an overseas production order for electronic data which is believed to contain any journalistic data, not just confidential journalistic data.

Amendment 17, page 10, line 12, at end insert—

‘(1A) Where an application is for journalistic data, the court must not determine such an application in the absence of the journalist affected, unless—

(a) the journalist has had at least two business days in which to make representations; or

(b) the court is satisfied that—

(i) the applicant cannot identify or contact the journalist,

(ii) it would prejudice the investigation if the journalist were present,

(iii) it would prejudice the investigation to adjourn or postpone the application so as to allow the journalist to attend, or

(iv) the journalist has waived the opportunity to attend.’

This amendment would give a journalist opportunities to make representations in relation to any application for data which he or she may hold.

Government amendment 20.

Amendment 9, page 10, line 20, leave out subsection (4) and insert—

‘(4) Confidential journalistic data means data—

(a) that a journalist holds that is subject to such an undertaking, restriction or obligation; and

(b) that has been continuously held (by one or more persons) subject to such an undertaking, restriction or obligation since it was first acquired or created for the purposes of journalism.’

This amendment would redefine confidential journalistic data for the purposes of the Bill.

Amendment 11, page 10, line 20, leave out subsection (4) and insert—

‘(4) Journalistic data is “confidential journalistic data” if—

(a) it is acquired or created by a person or persons in their capacity as a journalist and is held in confidence, or

(b) it is communications data of a person acting in their capacity as a journalist, or

(c) it is held subject to a restriction on disclosure, or an obligation of secrecy, contained in any enactment (whenever passed or made).’

This amendment would amend the definition of confidential journalistic data.

Government amendments 21 to 23, 7 and 8.

Mr Wallace: May I begin by making a slight apology to the House? As the amendments have been grouped together, my speech will be in a single block, so I ask Members to be patient.

Let me begin by addressing amendments 12, 1 and 24. I recognise that amendment 24 has not been selected, but I am happy to deal with it, because it was tabled.

Throughout the progress of this Bill, as with others that I have piloted through the House, I have been keen to reach a consensus. Labour Front Benchers, as well as members of the Scottish National party, will know that I have often been open to their ideas, and that in the case of a number of Bills—such as the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill and indeed this Bill—I have taken their ideas on board and put them into law. I have done so not only because I truly care about keeping our citizens safe, but because I know that our laws work best when they do what they set out to do and are supported by the broadest consensus of the public.

The House of Commons cannot ignore the times in which we live. In the last decade, we have become more and more dependent on the internet and smartphones. In fact, 78% of people and 95% of 16 to 24-year-olds now possess a smartphone. Such technology can be a force for good, but it has also become an accelerant to those who wish us harm. Whether we are talking about county lines, terrorism or child abuse, smartphones have opened up a whole world of encrypted communications which I believe presents the biggest single challenge to our police and to law enforcement.

As Security Minister, I recall many occasions on which I was woken to deal with security issues. I remember being woken on the night of the Manchester Arena bombing, and I remember hearing the chilling news that a nerve agent had been used on the streets of Salisbury. But the day that I remember above all from the last two and a half years was the day of my visit to a regional and organised crime unit, where I had to listen, via an online chatroom, to a paedophile plot to kidnap, rape and kill a seven-year-old girl, about the same age as my daughter. If that was not sickening enough, I could sense the frustration of detectives who needed data from overseas to stop the abuse being committed, because in case after case timing is everything in these investigations.

So when the US Government, supported by Senators in the House of Congress, offered to help to solve this problem we grabbed at the chance. The House should recognise what they have offered: they have offered to remove legal barriers in the US to enable compliance with UK court orders. The Americans recognised, as we do, that the vast majority of data that we need for our investigations reside on the other side of the Atlantic—Google, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, to name but a few. In fact, 99% of data that we need for child abuse investigations resides overseas and only 1% resides here.

These stark figures say two things to me. First, the reality is that we need the US data far more than they need ours. That was true before Donald Trump and it will be true after Donald Trump. Secondly, in this case, the US is doing us a favour. The Bill before us is the legislation required to give effect to a future US treaty and any other treaty we may make with another country in future, for example, Canada, so we can access that data much more quickly than we do now. These treaties will come before us separately, to this House and the peers House, at a different time, and Members will be able to scrutinise and challenge them at that point.

Let me deal directly with the Labour amendments. During the Bill’s passage in the Lords the Labour party attached to this Bill an amendment that would prevent the UK from making the necessary treaty with the US unless it got assurances that data sent across the Atlantic would not lead to the death penalty. This Bill allows law enforcement agencies to access content directly from communications service providers based overseas using an overseas production order. These orders can only
work when a relevant international agreement, such as a treaty, is in place between the UK and another country and as the majority of the CSFs, as I said, are based in America we expect the first such agreement to be with the United States. Both amendments 1 and 12 attempt to amend the Bill and reinset the Lords amendments.

First, and bearing in mind how little data we hold here, having looked back over 20 years, we have not been able to find a single case whatsoever where only the data that the Bill deals with would have led to a death penalty overseas. Secondly, this is about data, not people. Extradition from the UK is dealt with by separate legislation and Her Majesty's Government are already prevented from handing over someone without death penalty assurances. Thirdly, this Bill is about our data requests overseas in order to bring data back here for investigations and when I last looked we do not have the death penalty in this country. So to try to use the Bill as a vehicle to deal with a treaty as yet not concluded is simply wrong.

Throughout the passage of the Bill, I have been clear that the US has been generous in its offer. I have also admitted on the record that on this subject we do not have equality of arms with the US. This is not about a fantasy that we are bowing to the US. I noticed the allegations that the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) made in her column in the Daily Mirror recently saying that this was all about cosy ing up to Donald Trump, that the Labour party amendment “simply blocks data sharing co-operation with all countries if the death penalty is a risk”, and that the “reason Ministers seem to be so keen to tear up our laws and ignore our human rights is because they are in a terrible mess in refusing to rule out a No Deal Brexit.”

Of course, nowhere does her op-ed address the central allegation that her blocking data will mean child abusers of course, nowhere does her op-ed address the central allegation that her blocking data will mean child abusers will be free to continue abuse of children for longer because we simply will not be able to get the data that we want. And perhaps I could put her mind at rest: the US offer on this treaty was initiated not under President Trump, but under President Obama. This is about the reality and the decisions we need to make to protect children who are being raped, abused and terrorised. It is an experience that our law enforcement officers will not get the data in a timely fashion. Is he happy to accept that that delay should be maintained for the sake of a theoretical, never-happened occasion in the future?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am in favour of speeding up the data exchange. Under the mutual legal assistance treaty, since 1994 the seeking and securing of assurances has been commonplace. I take this from the High Court judgment. Ministers did not even bother to ask for assurances in the summer, so I am not confident that they have been as robust as they should be in their negotiations with the United States. There is no point in saying there is not equality of arms in this treaty. What if the Minister says that about a trade deal with the US—are we going to be allowing, then, US companies to come and take our NHS? The Minister should stand up for this principle.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman offers an incredibly selective quote from the ruling in the High Court by the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales that found in favour of the Government on that case on all five counts. Every single count and every single challenge by Liberty and its glitterati up in the House of Lords failed at that test. The hon. Gentleman has also not answered the central charge, which is that to jeopardise this legislation and the treaty puts at risk children, because our law enforcement officers will not get the data in a timely fashion. Is he happy to accept that that delay should be maintained for the sake of a theoretical, never-happened occasion in the future?

Ann Coffey: Does the Minister agree that this should be the issue, not “simply blocks data sharing co-operation with all countries if the death penalty is a risk”;

Mr Wallace: I am going to stand up for the security of our citizens and a responsible Government have to balance abstract, theoretical, minute probabilities with keeping our constituents safe. Perhaps I should remind the hon. Gentleman of what we found in one of the cases. It is not related to this data, As I have clearly said, this Bill produces not a single example in the last 20 years, but under the MLA T process in the past no assurances have been sought and indeed the Government of the day indicated there was potentially a death penalty. It was a Labour Government who did not seek the assurances and did transfer the data. What does that mean? It means a responsible Government know the balance between keeping our citizens safe and making sure they comply with our international obligations. Members on the Opposition Benches have managed to do that in the past and I hope they do it again.

I have been absolutely clear. The hon. Gentleman may say he would do a better job in the negotiations if Labour was in power but, as I pointed out, we do not have equality of arms. Our negotiating position is this: there is 1% of data here versus about 90% of data there, which means our leverage is minuscule when it comes to demanding strings attached of the United States.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that this should not be a point of political division in this House? It is the overwhelming priority of Parliament to protect children who are being raped, abused and exploited, and data sharing is very important. One of the barriers to protecting children has been getting data to identify people who are doing this. We want to prevent the exploitation of children and to do that we need to identify those who would exploit them. Does the Minister agree that this should be the issue, not views about Donald Trump or otherwise?

Mr Wallace: I totally agree. The hon. Lady will have heard the example I had to listen to. That was a sobering and scary experience. It is an experience that our law
enforcement officers hear every single day and it is our duty to find a balance. I wish we had our own Google. I wish that all my constituents’ data were held in the United Kingdom so we would have more control over it. But the fact is we live in the world we do. That is the tragedy and it makes us have to make deals that might not always be, as we would wish, perfect. But in this case, I am concerned, like her, that what must come first is the children’s needs and dealing with terrorists, illicit finance and all the oligarchs we worry about—and Labour Front Benchers also worry about—and how we are going to get them. Until we can crack that data map, this is something that is important.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is making an important case for the provisions in the Bill, and I agree that we have to have this data sharing. We have to speed this up and get on with it. His new clause 1 looks like a pretty reasonable compromise to provide the necessary reassurances. It looks fairly complete to me, and I can see no reason why the House would not unanimously agree to it.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is right. Further amendments that we have tabled provide for concessions to protect journalistic data. I have taken on board these points from Members on both sides of the House. Throughout the Bill, I have met many Opposition colleagues, including my shadow, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) was a member. That put in writing part 9. There are occasions on which we might be allowed not to seek assurances. The overseas security and justice assistance—OSJA—guidance was published in 2010 by the coalition Government, of which I think the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) was a member. That put in writing part 9. There are occasions on which we might be allowed not to seek a death penalty assurance, but I do not want that to become the dominant force. As I have said, we have not found a single example in the past 20 years that produced this challenge or quandary for a Minister. This is simply about comms content data; that is all it is about.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I hope the Minister recognises that all Members on both sides of the House want to find ways of sharing data so that we can go after these wicked people who abuse children. Will he therefore tell us what efforts have been made, in discussions with our American friends, to find a treaty that deals with those crimes and others but stops short of those crimes that could result in the death penalty? What efforts have been made to carve out those crimes so that they could be dealt with in a second treaty?

Mr Wallace: I have personally asked them to look at carve-outs in that area, and I know that officials are still working on the drafts. This is my point: the treaty will come before the House when it is still in its draft stage. I have not read the draft as it stands; it is too early. This is not going to appear next Tuesday as a treaty. We will try to maintain as much as we can in the treaty, but we must recognise the leverage that we have, the generosity of the Obama Administration’s original offer and the need of our law enforcement agencies to get on with these investigations as soon as possible.

Sir Edward Davey rose—

Mr Wallace: I will press on, because I want to give the House an example. An operation commenced in August 2017 in which there were indications that a UK male suspect was using Facebook, Instagram, Gmail and Snapchat for the purpose of committing child sex offences. On the male suspect’s Facebook profile, he purports to be a teenage girl requesting friendship with teenage boys. He then engages them in sexual communication, asking them to send indecent images and/or videos of themselves committing sexual acts. The suspect sent indecent images of females sourced from the internet as bait to lure his victims into believing that they were communicating with and sharing indecent images with a teenage girl. The investigation has identified several individual Facebook accounts where indecent images of children have been sent to the user of the suspect Facebook account. Those individual accounts all belong to children.

The value of data evidence is apparent, because in that operation, the data has helped to identify in excess of 150 vulnerable child victims and enabled law enforcement to safeguard the children. However, the law enforcement agencies are still awaiting the authorisation from a judge in a US court to release the content that would enable us to prosecute and put away the individual who is doing this. Consequently, that individual is still at large. We have safeguarded the victims we know of, but our ability to charge and prosecute that person is being frustrated. We should not forget that a great deal of data is held for only 12 months, and some of the MLAT cases go on for two years or more. Not taking up the US’s offer would mean shutting the door on our police’s ability to stop abuse more quickly and to detect terror plots before they reach fruition.

Sir Edward Davey: I repeat that the case the Minister is making is supported on both sides of the House. I very much doubt that there will be a Division on Third Reading—certainly we on these Benches will be supporting the Bill at that time—so he does not need to make this case, because we all support him. The issue of this debate on new clause 1 and other alternatives is whether we can achieve the goals on which we all agree while also finding a way to implement existing Government policy on death penalty assurances. The Minister is recognised for working across the House—that is why he is held in such high regard—but it is our right to scrutinise legislation in this place, and in this debate we want to tease out whether we can find a way, through the treaties or through the Bill, to get those death penalty assurances that I am sure he also wants.
Mr Wallace: I understand what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, and I do not question his heartfelt desire to ensure that we keep people safe, but actions have consequences. He does not have to believe me when I say this, but the United States has indicated to the Government that if we attach strings to the treaty in the way that the Lords amendment would, the treaty will not progress. He does not have to believe me; he does not have to believe the United States; he can decide whether he thinks the United States will change its position or not, but let me tell him my reading of it. I have met representatives from the US Department of Justice, along with my officials and representatives from our embassy, and looked at the political situation in the Senate—I live in the real world; that is not necessarily how I would vote—and I am living with the challenge of balancing those realities, as any hon. Member would do. If these amendments, including that of the right hon. Gentleman, go through, they will jeopardise the treaty. I have set out clearly what the consequence would be if the treaty were jeopardised, and no amount of “I wish it wasn’t” will change that simple fact.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Are we not in danger of believing that there is a false choice between upholding the UK’s international obligations and taking action to secure this treaty? Will the UK not be obliged to follow its treaty obligations, including the human rights protocol 12 of the European convention on human rights, without needing to follow one of the wrecking amendments tabled by the Opposition parties and making the treaty that we apparently all want impossible to achieve?

Mr Wallace: Yes, and in answer to the amendment that was tabled but not selected, Ministers are obliged to act in accordance with our ECHR obligations. Throughout this process, we have a legal duty under the Human Rights Act 1998 to act compatibly with convention rights, including article 1 of the 13th protocol, which was incorporated in schedule 1 to the Human Rights Acts 1998 through the Human Rights Act (Amendment) Order 2004. Were Ministers to act unlawfully in making subordinate legislation under subsection 5(b) that was incompatible with the convention rights, it would be open to the courts to strike down that legislation by applying ordinary public law principles.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): First, I want to confirm what my right hon. Friend has said. This treaty being negotiated with United States has taken a long time to achieve. I remember being connected with it when I was Attorney General, and raising the matter subsequently on visits to the United States when I was Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee. It is quite apparent that the treaty is essential to prevent crime in this country. It is equally clear that attaching the proposed strings to it would destroy it; I have no doubt about that at all. I also endorse the point that the European convention on human rights has to govern everything that we do. In my view, in regard to the sort of data we are seeking to access and share for the purpose of fighting crime, the issue of whether the death penalty might result from an eventual criminal proceeding, which would be speculative at that stage, is entirely irrelevant.

Mr Wallace: My right hon. and learned Friend, whom I have known a long time, is the straightest politician in this House and always has the best motives. He is also the lawyer that one would want at one’s side in government, because he tells it how it is, not how one wants it to be. I thank him for his point. He knows how far back this effort goes. This Bill is not a political charge or an ideological step. In fact, without this amendment, it is probably one of the most boring Bills that we have taken through the House, but it is not a playground for ideological posturing on a theoretical issue.

There is a clear choice here: take up the offer from the United States, reject the amendment and help to keep our constituents safe, or agree with the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington who believes that this matter is a problem even though there are no examples from the past 20 years. She believes that we should say no to the US offer and put the whole thing at risk because our tiny amount of data could be combined with a criminal investigation overseas, when the crime is a capital offence and the offender is in a country or US state that has the death penalty, and our data alone could be the crucial piece of evidence that leads to a conviction. If ever there was an example of politics getting in the way for the most bizarre and abstract reason, it is here.

Sir Edward Davey rose—

Mr Wallace: I will come to the right hon. Gentleman. All the amendments are grouped, so we have plenty of time.

Having said that, I have to apologise to the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington and to the Leader of the Opposition. In her column, the right hon. Lady said that I attacked her personally by criticising what was going on. I apologise that I did so, but I did so because I meant it. That is not the Labour party that I know. I have family in the Labour party. I have a relation who was a Labour MP in the 1930s and, if I remember correctly, the first socialist Lord Advocate in Scotland. The Labour party that I know would not play this type of politics with our constituents. A Labour party led by pretty much any other Labour Member would never have indulged in this type of nonsense.

The Labour party that I know in Lancashire, in the north of England and in Scotland keeps people safe and recognises the responsibility that goes with governing and that there is a balance. It is a truly difficult balance, which people of the best motives make every single day, between upholding values and keeping people safe. That is why I apologise that I had to make that attack, but I made it all the same. It is incredibly important that a Government in waiting should be led by people who recognise that their duty in government will be to make difficult decisions and to reflect the reality of the 21st century, not some abstract theoretical nonsense that panders to a few.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I regret the Minister’s tone in places, because it is clear that we have worked together on this Bill and that the Opposition are in favour of it. Let me be clear about the difference here. The Minister is essentially saying that he is happy to be mandated to secure death penalty assurances. Labour’s amendment
simply sets out that in the event that assurances are sought but not obtained, the data should not be handed over. As he says, the change will affect a tiny amount of cases, but nobody is disputing the need to speed up the MLAT process to obtain the data. That is exactly what the difference is.

Mr Wallace: No. The Labour Front-Bench team are saying that if we do not get what they want, we should block the treaty. The condition from the United States or any other country could be, “Look, I’m terribly sorry, but we have 90% of the data and you have 1%, so here’s our offer and this is the reality of it.” Labour is saying, “If they do not give us the assurances we want”—they go beyond the OSJA guidance and beyond the public policy of this Government and the previous Government—“the treaty will not be completed.” I am here to say that the treaty will not be concluded if those strings are attached in that way. That is the simple reality.

The consequences of that, as I have pointed out, will be felt in our constituencies up and down the country and will also be felt should the Labour Front-Bench team become the Government in a few years’ time. The people could be facing an existential threat to their security, and that Labour Government would have to make these same difficult decisions. We have worked incredibly well together on this Bill, but this issue cannot be removed into some abstract debate when this is about giving our law enforcement agencies the tools to do their job on a day-to-day basis.

Sir Edward Davey: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I repeat that, as he knows, both sides of the House want exactly what he has just described. However, this House’s job is to scrutinise and ensure that legislation is being done in the right way so that other parts of Government policy are also upheld. He said in response to the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), a former Attorney General, that we should not worry about this because ECHR obligations, which he read out in some detail, would prevent Ministers from not complying with this policy. Will the Minister elaborate on that for the benefit the House? When the Home Secretary recently did not seek death penalty assurances, was that decision in line with our convention obligations?

Mr Wallace: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the rulings by the High Court and the Lord Chief Justice. On five of the grounds for challenge from the plaintiff—if that is the right word in a civil challenge—the rulings found in favour of the Government. I am happy to have a conversation with him about that further if he reads the whole judgment, but it was certainly the case that the OSJA guidance and other things were not found to be in conflict with our ECHR obligations or any other obligation. If my memory serves me right, it was also found that we were not breaking our own Government policy on the matter. I caution the House that we do not know whether that judgment will be appealed, but a hearing related to it is ongoing. The case does not relate to data; it is about broader evidence that would remain through the MLAT process. As I pointed out earlier, extradition is a separate process. This legislation is about the data predominantly held by Facebook and Google and everything else, and it is so much part of the 21st century that we cannot escape the impact that it has on us.

Turning to amendment 18, I recall the hon. Member for Torfaen tabling something similar in Committee, and I am afraid that I am going to make the same arguments in response. Amendment 18 seeks to ensure that terms on which other states may access electronic data held in the UK mirror the UK’s own safeguards for press freedom. Forgive me, because I know that I have made this point countless times, but this amendment relates to incoming requests for UK-held data when this Bill is only about the UK’s outgoing requests for electronic data held overseas.

I completely accept the point that this Bill cannot work without a reciprocal international agreement in place, but amendment 18 directly relates to international agreements, as opposed to what our Bill provides for. This Bill is simply not the right place to mandate what is a right and laudable protection for journalists and their data. We cannot impose such conditions in advance of the negotiations of an international agreement. It is not a constructive proposition to tie our hands. I say to Opposition Members that I hear the case for change and that the United States’ first amendment is probably one of the strongest journalistic protections, so that would no doubt be reflected in a treaty. Of course, the UK would never agree to share data with a country with insufficient safeguards, but to mandate that on the face of this Bill is neither helpful nor necessary. Amendment 18 seeks to control the UK Government’s negotiating position, which would not prove desirable to any Government of the day.

Another point that I make repeatedly is to remind hon. Members that they will get ample opportunity to scrutinise any international agreement when the agreement is brought before Parliament, before it can be ratified under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 process, and then again when secondary legislation is laid before Parliament designating the agreement for the purposes of clause 1 and under section 52 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. The Government amended the Bill in the other place to make it clear that only agreements to which the CRAG process applies may be designated under the Bill, so that scrutiny process must be followed in every case. Members will get the opportunity to scrutinise all international agreements related to this Bill properly before they are ratified.

I have two other brief points. First, the initial international agreement will be with the United States, as the majority of overseas CSPs are currently based there. As hon. Members will know, the US places a high regard on protecting freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Indeed, it is enshrined in the first amendment to their constitution.

Secondly, any additional international agreement that the UK enters into in future will, of course, be based on trust, mutual respect and each country’s adherence to principles that include the rule of law, due process and judicial oversight for obtaining and handling electronic evidence with regards to serious crime. No rational Government of the day would do a deal with a country that lacked regard for the rule of law or that failed to maintain press freedom. If a CSP moved to a country with insufficient legal safeguards, I would not push the
Government of the day in any way to negotiate such an agreement, and I highly doubt that Parliament would ratify such a treaty.

This Bill is not the right place for the proposals raised by amendment 18. The amendment is not necessary for the reasons I have outlined, and therefore the Government will not support it. I ask the hon. Member for Torfaen not to press it.

Amendment 10 seeks to make confidential journalistic data an excepted category of material for overseas production orders, meaning that it cannot be sought using the Bill’s powers. Amendments 9 and 11 seek to define confidential journalistic data for the purposes of the Bill. Members have previously raised concerns about confidential journalistic data under the Bill, and I do not want to pre-empt our debate on other protections for journalists, which will come later, but the Government’s concessions in this area are appropriate and proportionate. I do not think it is right that confidential journalistic data should be entirely outside the reach of law enforcement agencies.

As with the amendment tabled in Committee, amendment 10 goes further than what is currently provided for under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. Although confidential journalistic material is excluded under PACE, it is accessible if certain access conditions are met.

I repeat the point I made previously. The Bill has not been drafted to mirror PACE exactly. It also takes into account provisions of the Terrorism Act 2000 and the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. The whole point of the Bill is to speed up the unnecessarily long, drawn-out process that law enforcement agencies currently endure to get access to material to help keep our constituents safe. Of course, this in no way undermines the stringent tests that must be passed for an order to be granted in a court by a judge. The substantial value test and the public interest test will both have to be satisfied, and I will shortly come on to the further inclusion of a relevant evidence test.

Amendment 11 would carve out journalists’ communications data so that it cannot be accessed under the powers of the Bill. Such an amendment is not necessary, because clause 3(4) already precludes the possibility of obtaining communications data via an overseas production order. Where an overseas production order is sought against a telecommunications operator, the Bill will apply as if references to excepted electronic data included communications data.

The Bill has been deliberately drafted so as to avoid overlap with the existing regime for communications data under the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. Should law enforcement agencies wish to obtain any form of communications data, journalistic or otherwise, they will need to proceed using existing legislation to obtain it. To be clear, this Bill does not allow for the acquisition of communications data.

I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman that journalists play a fundamental role in our society, but amendments 9 to 11 are not appropriate. This Bill will ensure that all journalists are part of the process of applying for an overseas production order when the material sought relates to them from the outset. Uniquely, they will be able to make representations to the court. I am confident that journalists will continue to be able to make a robust defence if they believe that is relevant.

Indeed, when working with the BBC on this legislation, one lawyer told my officials that not once in 10 years could he recall a court having overruled such representations. It is important that legislation drafted in the 21st century reflects the context of the day. The nature of journalism is evolving, and law enforcement officers must be able to adapt to those changes. I therefore ask the hon. Gentleman not to press amendments 9 to 11.

In Committee, colleagues including the hon. Members for Torfaen and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) expressed concern that the tests in clause 4 do not fully replicate the tests under schedule 1 to PACE, under which there is a relevant evidence test as well as a substantial value test and a public interest test, whereas the Bill currently includes only the substantial value and public interest tests. The Bill does not contain the relevant evidence test. As I explained in Committee, the Bill replicates the production orders not only under PACE but under POCA and the Terrorism Act. Neither POCA nor the Terrorism Act requires the relevant evidence test when seeking evidence in relation to the proceeds of crime, as our law enforcement agencies will do with overseas production orders. Nevertheless, I promise to go away and consider the issues.

2.45 pm

My officials have discussed the issues with operational partners, and their feedback is that a relevant evidence test would have neither a preventive effect nor a negative effect on their operation. I will therefore include a relevant evidence test in the Bill, and Government amendments 2 and 3 are sufficient in that respect and render amendments 13 to 15 unnecessary. I trust that introducing a relevant evidence test will satisfy the concerns of hon. Members.

Amendments 4 to 7 will ensure that the Bill is subject to and consistent with the existing data protection framework. I am sure hon. Members will welcome that clarification. It is also the Government’s intention to ensure that the provisions of the Bill involving the use of personal data be read in conjunction with and remain subject to our existing data protection framework. These amendments will therefore avoid any confusion in how those measures are interpreted.

Under amendment 7, clause 17 will make it clear that references to data protection legislation have the same meaning as the definition in section 3 of the Data Protection Act 2018, which includes the general data protection regulation, the 2018 Act and any regulations made under it. Members may recall that part 3 of the 2018 Act includes specific rules for the processing of data for criminal law enforcement purposes and implements the law enforcement directive.

In practice, the amendments to clause 6 clarify that a communications service provider against whom an overseas production order is made is under no obligation—to taking into account the existence of the order—to comply in any way that would contravene the requirements of the data protection legislation, as defined in the 2018 Act. The amendments also clarify that, where UK law enforcement agencies receive electronic data from a communications service provider following a court-approved order, they must process the data in accordance with part 3 of the 2018 Act. That responds to important
questions about clause 10 raised by peers during the Bill’s passage in the other place. I hope my clarification of those points will be welcomed by hon. Members and will reassure peers. I therefore ask hon. Members to accept and support these clarifying amendments.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle for his contributions in Committee on the protection of journalists under the Bill. He performs an important role as chair of the all-party BBC group, and in that capacity he has played a valuable role in discussions on the provisions relating to journalistic data. I listened carefully to his arguments and to the arguments of other hon. Members on both sides of the House.

I agree that the Bill should include appropriate safeguards for legitimate journalism, and I have listened carefully to the arguments as to what form those safeguards should take, while preventing those who might falsely pose as a journalist from hiding behind protections to which they are not entitled. The Government therefore tabled amendments 19 to 23, which my hon. Friend suggested, to ensure that, when journalistic data is sought, the journalist is notified of the application. This will give journalists and media outlets the opportunity, should they want to, to make representations to the court about whether an application for an overseas production order should be granted. That was always the Government’s intention, but our proposal was that the application be granted by a judge. It is not done between officials in two Administrations: these orders will be applied for in front of a court and granted by a judge. It will be for the law enforcement agencies to satisfy the range of tests and for journalists to make their representations. That will safeguard the process while at the same ensuring that we get data if it is needed to keep us safe.

Huw Merriman: I should point out that unlike the Opposition amendment—I think the shadow Front-Bench team largely supported the same change—the amendment that I tabled was realistic about the point that if the journalist could not be contacted, that would not mean that we would end the process. Ultimately, what is important is the protection of victims of appalling offences. My amendment will make sure that we strike that balance between the protection of journalists and the protection of victims, which is at the core of this excellent Bill.

Mr Wallace: Yes, my hon. Friend makes a true point. We have put in a carve-out for some very urgent situations, including if there is a threat to life or, indeed, if the journalist is impossible to track down and may in fact be a front for a foreign state, for example, in a fake news scenario or something else. All Members have had genuine views and made their points well. I am happy to accept my hon. Friend’s amendment, but there were many good parts of the amendments tabled by the Labour party, too. This is not a party political point. The exemptions get the right balance and we will be able to protect journalists, so I hope I will have the support of the whole House in asking that the relevant amendments not be pressed.

Before I finish, I should apologise for the length of my opening address. There were originally two groups of amendments, but that was changed to one group, so I needed to deal with everyone’s amendments in one go.

I think we have struck the right balance. The Bill reflects some of the day-to-day challenges that we face in keeping us safe. I urge Members not to support amendments 12 and 18, and some of the others tabled by the Opposition Front-Bench team. As I indicated at the start, throughout the passage of this Bill and other Bills, I have accepted a number of amendments from Government and Opposition Members. That is the spirit in which I have tried to conclude the passage of this Bill, and in which I hope to do so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before we continue with the debate, the House has the exciting prospect of the results of the deferred Divisions.

In respect of the question relating to consumer protection, the Ayes were 309 and the Noes were 268, so the Ayes have it.

In respect of the question relating to financial services and markets, the Ayes were 309 and the Noes were 261, so the Ayes have it.

In respect of the question relating to floods and water, the Ayes were 310 and the Noes were 267, so the Ayes have it.

In respect of the question relating to radioactive substances, the Ayes were 309 and the Noes were 265, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today’s debates.]
Nick Thomas-Symonds: The first thing I should point out is that everyone in the House wants to see a way in which the mutual legal assistance treaty system is speeded. I do not think there is any issue with that in any part of this House. The issues to which I shall come in a moment in essence fall into two categories: first, the issue of death penalty assurances; and secondly, protections for journalistic data.

In respect of the intervention from the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), he has tabled an amendment that is essentially the same as the one that I pursued in Committee. I do not accept in any sense the difference that he suggests there is between the two. I am pleased that his amendment has been accepted and adopted by the Government.

Huw Merriman: I apologise if I have got this wrong, but my understanding is that the hon. Gentleman’s amendment would not have included circumstances in which the journalist could not be traced, whereas the amendment I have tabled takes that into account, meaning that it would not be a blocker. It is in that limited aspect that our amendments differ.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: All I will say is that I had discussions about that amendment and others with the Minister, and they were things on which we were able to compromise. I am trying to assure the hon. Gentleman that the idea that I was trying to do something to scupper the treaty is completely wrong. I am sure he would accept that that was the case, whatever the differences between us on the detail.

Huw Merriman: I absolutely accept that. The hon. Gentleman will know that he and I worked closely throughout the Committee proceedings to make sure that the intent behind what we have now was in the Bill. I give credit to him for that assistance.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for acknowledging that.

Let me turn to the issue of death penalty assurances, which has clearly aroused a great deal of controversy, and explain our position. I should say to the Security Minister that I totally accept that new clause 1 is an improvement. The position the Opposition have ended up in today is a procedural one: unfortunately, because new clause 1 is the lead provision in the group and is therefore at the head of the list to be voted on, the only way that the Opposition can secure a vote on our own amendment is by voting against new clause 1. That is just the procedural position we have ended up in, but accept that it is a step forward and make that entirely clear from the Dispatch Box at the outset.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): Just to be clear on the procedure, my hon. Friend’s direction to Labour MPs will be to vote against new clause 1, although he accepts it to be an improvement; were he successful in stripping out new clause 1 and unsuccessful in passing his own amendment, would that not put us back to a worse position?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I accept that there is always a danger that when we vote on a number of new clauses and amendments in a row, the order matters and what happens on them matters, as we have seen in recent days. Let me reassure my hon. Friend: what I am trying to say is that although I do accept that new clause 1, with its duty to seek assurances, is certainly an improvement on the case we had in the summer, when no assurances were sought at all, it does not match the position of the Labour Front-Bench team, which is that if there are circumstances—they will be rare—in which assurances are sought but not given, the data should not be handed over. That is the difference between myself and the Minister. The Minister accepts that we should be getting assurances. That is the difference: new clause 1 is an improvement, but it does not match our position.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a children’s doctor, I have looked after a number of children who have been sexually abused, and they have sometimes horrific physical injuries and, as we know, physical and mental scars. The mental scars in particular can last a lifetime. The House is united in wanting to be able to prevent that. Am I misunderstanding the hon. Gentleman when he says that seeking assurances is not adequate, and that if faced with a real situation in which a child is in imminent danger and those assurances cannot be got, that child should remain in danger and in a situation in which he or she is being abused, to avoid the theoretical risk of something that has not happened in 20 years?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I just do not accept that conception of how this works or, indeed, how the MLAT treaty would work. I am afraid it would not work in the way the hon. Lady suggests. The point I am making is about cases in which assurances were not secured. By the way, I totally agree with the Minister that the United States looms into view because of this treaty, but this is a framework for other treaties with countries all around the world, and the Opposition are simply saying that we should be embedding into it the idea that, in the event that those assurances are not forthcoming from whichever country it is—rare though those circumstances are—the data should not be handed over. It is as simple as that. By the way, that has been the position for decades.

3 pm

Dr Johnson rose—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will give once more, but then I need to make some progress.

Dr Johnson: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that, in this situation, which is not perfect, what he is having to do is weigh up the risk of an actual child to whom abuse can clearly be seen to be happening or at risk of happening, with a theoretical possibility, which the Minister has said has not happened in 20 years, and that such evidence can potentially, theoretically, possibly, at some point in the future, be used to convict somebody in a way that may or may not ultimately end in the death penalty? Meanwhile that real child will end up being further abused while this data is waited for.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I do not accept that at all. The hon. Lady talks about theoretical possibilities, but these will be actual cases—actual cases, not theoretical ones.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con) rose—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will give way once more.
Mark Pritchard: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for giving way. Despite the fact that this is about not extradition, but data exchange and that it is heinous crimes that will incorporate this provision, does he accept that the threshold for the death penalty, both at state and federal level, is actually far higher—the bar is higher?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, it is significantly higher, and the cases will be extraordinarily rare. That is what everybody who has looked at this says.

Mark Pritchard: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for giving way. The hon. Gentleman is being more than generous. On the issue of assurances, does he also accept—I know that he thinks logically—that if those assurances were given and were not actually fulfilled, future assurances would obviously not carry the same weight as previous assurances that were carried through?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I honestly cannot imagine a situation where a country that gave those assurances did not stand by them. That would undermine the whole system if that were the case. I do need to make some progress now. I hope that the House will realise that I have been generous in giving way to Government Members.

We absolutely agree, as I have said, with speeding up the mechanism, but we believe that in this framework, which will be a framework which many reciprocal treaties will be plugged into in the years to come, we should make clear our opposition to the death penalty in all circumstances. The Security Minister has spoken about the United States. I appreciate that that is where much data is held. I also appreciate that that is the treaty that is being negotiated at the moment. First, let us look at what the practice is at the moment. It is obvious that the United States would expect us to require full death penalty assurances prior to sharing this information. It routinely complies with that requirement. It has long been the case, under the 1944 treaty on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters that now exists, that the seeking and securing of assurances is commonplace. What the Opposition are trying to put into law is what has been the norm for decades.

The Minister makes the point about his judgment as to whether or not the US would wish to conclude a treaty in those circumstances—in the circumstances that the House passed the amendment that the Opposition have proposed. I just want to examine this because the recent High Court judgment in El Gizouli, which has been published in recent days, is instructive in this regard. It is very rare that we see Government papers in the public domain so soon after a particular decision is taken. That is because in July last year the House became aware of correspondence between the Home Secretary and the then United States Attorney General that the Government had not sought death penalty assurances at all. Let me be clear that we on these Benches absolutely condemn the actions of the so-called foreign fighters, which is why I have worked with the Minister to put the designated areas offence on to the statute book—it is not quite on our statute book yet, but it will be in due course. I made various suggestions about that matter, as the Minister knows, that were eventually incorporated into the Bill. We supported that principle and it will be on the statute book. However, the fact is that that matter did lead to a court case, which is instructive about Minister’s decision making.

I go back to one of the earlier interventions. This is not about naked partisan politics. These are very serious issues on which Members from all parts of the House have very strongly held opinions, and I respect whatever those perspectives are. A number of things came forward from that case in the summer. The UK embassy in Washington was asked what was the likely response from the US Administration if the UK were to seek full or partial assurances on the death penalty. The response was that “parts of the US machinery—notably career DOJ officials—would not be surprised if we asked for death penalty assurances. It is what they expect of us.” That, I suggest, is what I said a moment or two ago. It then added: “But that doesn’t go for the senior political levels of this administration...At best they will think we have tin ears. At worst, they will wind the President up to complain to the PM and, potentially, to hold a grudge.”

That is worrying to see, and it would not be a way to run any negotiation. It is no surprise really that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office gave strong advice to seek an assurance. This was cited as the Government’s consistent policy over many years, which has been maintained without exception—I appreciate the one point that was made in an intervention by the Minister that there may be an exception to that. I accept that, but this is what the advice says—and without difficulty in co-operating with allies such as the US. It agreed that a sole exception would undermine the UK’s consistent and total opposition. This is what the Foreign and Commonwealth Office said about this in the summer: “Her Majesty’s Government seeks a comprehensive assurance that the suspects will not be subject to the death penalty. This is critical to the consistency with which we apply HM Government’s policy on Overseas Security and Justice Assistance...Were we not to apply this practice to this case, it could undermine all future efforts to secure effective written death penalty assurances from the US authorities for future UK security and justice assistance. The exception made for the US in this case could also undermine future attempts to secure similar assurances from other countries with which we have a security relationship... particularly if it seems likely that there is litigation which leads to the disclosure of the level of assurance. It could leave HM Government open to accusations of western hypocrisy and double standards which would undermine HM Government’s Death Penalty Policy globally, including in the US.”

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I wonder whether he will quote at length my response in that court case, the response of the Home Secretary, and, indeed, the other parts of the correspondence. He makes the point about the embassy. The embassy in the United States is the other part of
the Foreign Office. He may like to reflect on the fact that, first, we won on all five counts, so he has picked out a few parts of the case, but not the full case. He will also know that, under this and the previous policy, one cannot seek assurances under strong reasons. He talks about hypocrisy. One of the strong reasons—a bit like some of the challenges around data, but he is referring to an MLAT case—is that the alternatives for these individuals for their rights—[Interruption.] No, I get that. The alternatives for those individuals were very much less about their rights—potentially extrajudicial killing in the back of the head and potentially being shipped to Guantanamo, to which we fundamentally object and oppose and, as that case highlighted, something in which we would not assist. The alternative for their human rights was far, far worse than a lawful trial in the United States.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am not disputing the outcome of the case; that is very clear. This goes back to the earlier point that I was making about new clause 1. It is clearly not currently set out in primary legislation that there is a duty to seek assurances. I am not questioning the genuine nature of what the Minister does or his decision making, but in that case and against that backdrop, no assurances were sought at all. The Minister has set out the reasons for that, but that is the brutal reality of what happened in that case, against the backdrop of the advice that I have read to the House.

More widely, Governments across the piece—this Government, the coalition Government and previous Labour Governments—have, on numerous occasions, sought to promote the UK’s opposition to the use of the death penalty around the world. There are multiple examples where Governments of all colours have sought to avoid any complicity with the use of capital punishment and have argued around the world for its abolition. In fact, the Prime Minister herself said in the House on 31 October last year:

“Our long-standing position on the death penalty is well known: we call for its abolition globally.”—[Official Report, 31 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 911.]

And the Opposition say the same.

There are a number of examples where this country has agreed that it is highly undesirable that drugs used by some states in the United States for the purposes of execution could have been sourced here. We have decided not to fund counter-narcotics operations in Iran because of the risk that they could lead to the use of the death penalty. When the Prime Minister was Home Secretary, she triggered a review of all security engagement when Pakistan resumed executions after a long moratorium. Back in October 2016 the Government withdrew a bid to provide offender management services to Saudi Arabian prisons, again over the issue around the death penalty. And of course the UK will not export products for use in capital punishment. That is the well-established position, as is the seeking and securing of assurances.

Mark Pritchard: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will make some progress; I did give way to the hon. Gentleman about three times earlier.

What I am simply saying is that we should not move away from that norm and send any kind of signal because, in any event, this Bill goes far beyond America. I appreciate the Minister’s point about data and where it is held at present, but as the internet continues to evolve, other countries will hold more data as well. The Security Minister often said in Committee that he would only negotiate treaties with countries that shared our respect for the rule of law. I do not disbelieve him for a moment, but of course he is not going to be the Security Minister forever. Therefore, in those circumstances, we have to put the assurance in this framework now.

Opposition to the death penalty has been a bipartisan UK Government position for over half a century. Since 1965 when the work of many across this House—including the remarkable Sydney Silverman—came to fruition, this Parliament has stood as a beacon of common human values, promoting the abolition of the death penalty across the globe. For this country to continue to stand tall in the world and to use our considerable soft power, which we must, we always have to hold ourselves to the highest standards. Put very simply, for us to credibly argue for the abolition of the death penalty in other countries, we cannot be complicit in its application ourselves, and I ask that we send that strong moral signal to the world today.

It seems an odd move to now start talking about these technical issues of confidential journalistic data, important though they are. But that is of course where we are because this whole set of amendments have been grouped together. I therefore want to deal with the matter now, as well as some of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle.

In general terms, I am pleased with the Government’s direction of travel on these issues, but there are still some real causes of concern. I am pleased with the movement on Government amendments 19 and 20, which were mentioned earlier. The notification requirement now extends to all journalistic data. There was a concern that, if we were distinguishing between confidential data and non-confidential data, some would not be covered. This move is therefore to be welcomed, as is the genuine notification requirement that specifically includes the journalist, which I believe is included in Government amendment 20.

There are still some concerns that I hope the Security Minister will take on board and listen to, although I do broadly welcome the measures. In proposed clause 12(2)(b), there is an override of this requirement where it would prejudice investigations into indictable offences and terrorism investigations. Now, I accept that emergency overrides are necessary, and I would expect to see them in this Bill and other similar types of Bill. There is, however, quite a low threshold in this measure. I totally accept that prejudicing a terrorism investigation may well constitute an emergency, but prejudicing an investigation into an indictable offence is extremely broad, because indictable offences are a huge category. Indicating that they can only be tried on indictment draws the provision extremely widely.

3.15 pm

I think that there is a path by which the police could access confidential data still without notifying the journalist. The Minister has openly said that a number of provisions in this legislation are drawn from the Terrorism Act 2000 and the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Under the Terrorism Act, this can happen, although there is a concern about
some of this most sensitive data being accessed without notice. It is not my intention to push amendment 10 to a vote today, but in that amendment I have raised the issue of at least some confidential journalistic data simply being beyond the reach of the police. I appreciate the Government’s position, but the breadth of this measure to cover all indictable offences is a concern, and we need to give deep consideration as to how that might work in practice. I know that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle genuinely intends to produce safeguards in the Bill, but we would not want to construct a path that somehow becomes the norm, as opposed to something that is meant actually to be the exception.

On amendment 18, I part company with the Minister. It is an important amendment that would attain guarantees for freedom of expression in reciprocal treaties. I draw on what the Foreign Secretary wrote in the Evening Standard on 1 November:

“Defending a free media must therefore be a central element of British foreign policy, in keeping with our country’s role as an invisible chain linking the nations that share our values.”

The Minister made a technical point about incoming and outgoing data, but this system of overseas production orders is meant to work together with treaties with countries that will, in themselves, be reciprocal. Amendment 18 would be totally in line with what the Foreign Secretary said; it would really push our position as a beacon in the world of press freedom, saying that we would not be able to countenance a treaty with a country that did not have those similar levels of press freedoms, nor would we wish to have a situation where another country without the same level of press freedom as us somehow has this back door to access our data.

Although I differ with the Minister on amendment 18 and on the emotive issues that we discussed earlier, I want to finish on a more consensual note. I appreciate the Minister’s move on relevant evidence, which is to be praised. I also welcome the clear introduction in the Bill of the data protection regulation, which provides an important safeguard. On the issue of confidential journalistic data, I welcome the progress that has been made and say to the Minister that I hope that, throughout the passage of the Bill, we have shared aims and tried to work towards them.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Throughout the passage of this Bill and other Bills where we have engaged with the Security Minister and the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), there has been a collaborative approach. That is again the case on Report. As the Minister said, we have had a constructive relationship with him, which is why I was quite disappointed with the change in tone this afternoon—questioning the Opposition’s motives and accusing us of essentially protecting paedophiles. Every Member, as has been said, would like to see these despicable criminals convicted, but we have to ensure that legislation is passed with adequate protections for the human rights that we are obligated to protect under the ECHR. I hope that the Minister will perhaps reflect on that.

Amendment 12, as the hon. Member for Torfaen set out in granular detail—for the sake of the House, I will not seek to repeat that process—seeks to avoid the UK being complicit in allowing for the death penalty to be practised abroad using data provided by us. We have previously heard from the Government that this would amount to driving a horse and cart through the Bill, but this is a matter of principle that the SNP will simply never compromise on. We are obviously a signatory to the European convention on human rights, article 2 and protocol 139 of which provide for the complete abolition of the death penalty.

As I have said in the past, I deeply regret that the Government resisted this amendment from the Lords and took it out in Committee, but I am pleased that we have another opportunity to put this anti-death penalty provision back into the Bill today. In opposing the amendment, the Government are setting themselves not just against our responsibilities under the convention but against their own policy of opposing the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle.

In response to a written question, Baroness Anelay said:

“There has been no change in the British Government’s policy of working towards global abolition of the death penalty.

This Government pursues human rights in their universality—a more ambitious and coherent approach than focusing on a small number of single issues. Our commitment to the Rules Based International Order underpins this work, including through bilateral and multilateral support to global efforts to abolish the death penalty.”

As a signatory to the convention, we really should do everything in our power to avoid compliance in uses of the death penalty abroad. The UK at least claims to be a modern liberal democracy and a champion of human rights the world over. Opposing this amendment is entirely contradictory to those claims.

The Government have frequently refused to provide countries with aid and assistance where it is judged that that assistance could result in the use of capital punishment by the recipient party—for example, the review of UK security engagement when Pakistan resumed use of the death penalty, and declining to assist with services in Saudi Arabian prisons where juveniles were sentenced to the death penalty. Alongside this, as we have heard, the UK will not export products for use in capital punishment—for instance, medicines for use in lethal injections in the US. It would be inconsistent, not to mention a grave disregard for human rights, for the Government to refuse to supply the drugs for US executions, while providing the very information that made that execution possible.

Furthermore, the US already expects the UK to require full death penalty assurances prior to the sharing of information, and it routinely complies with this requirement—for example, in the recent “ISIS Beatles” case, when the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s strong advice was to seek a full death penalty assurance. This was cited at the time as the Government’s consistent policy, which has been maintained without exception and without difficulty in co-operating with allies such as the US. The FCO agreed that a sole exception would undermine the UK’s consistent and total opposition. No evidence has been presented on unwillingness from the US to engage in data-sharing arrangements where death penalty assurances are required. Without clear evidence to this effect, it is difficult to accept the Government’s proposition that the US would walk away from the negotiating table for that reason.
On new clause 1, while we welcome it as an improvement, it simply does not go far enough. It is restricted to a requirement for assurances in the context of section 52 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. However, data could be requested by another state through a different route that does not require active interception on the part of the UK. In those circumstances, our concern would be that these protections would not operate.

Mark Pritchard: The shadow Minister, rightly, gave a litany of examples where the Government have set out to abolish the death penalty worldwide. The SNP spokesman has referred to assurances on ISIS cases and other assurances. Given that we heard from the shadow Minister that assurances have been sought previously, I am a little puzzled about why that should change.

Gavin Newlands: Words are great but it is deeds that are important, and we think that this should be in this Bill. As the Bill is, to use the Minister’s term, the docking station for future agreements, we think that this should be in the Bill, which sets the tone of the regulations for future agreements.

Mark Pritchard: To help the House and to help me—I need all the help I can get—could the hon. Gentleman perhaps give an example of where assurances have not been sought in such cases?

Gavin Newlands: That is not the point—it is about the principles. We have spoken at length about this and listed some of them. It is about the principles, and we are signatories to the ECHR as well. We should ensure that these principles and obligations are in this Bill; otherwise, in my view, we are not following those obligations.

Amendment 1, tabled by the Liberal Democrats, is an improvement on new clause 1, but my only small concern—the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) may address this in his speech—is that it might not cover instances where data could be requested by another state through a different route, similarly to the issues that I set out with regard to new clause 1.

Amendment 12 simply refers to “where the treaty provides for requests” and therefore provides the most comprehensive level of protection. I urge Members from across the House to back this amendment, as our international reputation may well be degraded even further—if that were possible given the Brexit situation at the moment—if we enable this barbaric practice anywhere else in the world.

On journalistic protections, I very much welcome the amendments tabled by the Government and by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), but they still do not go far enough. They are fine in and of themselves, but other areas of journalistic protection still need to be looked at.

Mr Wallace: If the hon. Gentleman was sitting where I am and he had a choice before him where the United States Administration was saying, “Look, here’s the deal—we’ve got 99% of the data and you’ve got 1%,” we haven’t got equality of arms. This is the deal—you either take it without strings attached or you do not,” and if there were no deals and no treaty, as the amendment would provide, what would he do?

Gavin Newlands: That is almost a false choice. The Minister is painting it as a black-and-white issue. At the end of the day, on an issue of such grave importance as the death penalty, I would bring it to the House and seek the House’s view. It would not be for me to try to override our principles as set in the ECHR. The USA might well hold all the data, but if we do not hold to our principles, then what is the point? That is our view.

Clause 12 provides for a journalist to be given notice of and made a party to an application that pertains to their confidential journalistic material, but this does not apply to non-confidential but none the less extremely sensitive journalistic material. As I said in Committee, that is at odds with the domestic situation as outlined in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. The system proposed in the Bill will allow for a significantly reduced opportunity for journalists to engage in arguments about what is, and is not, suitable for disclosure, removing the opportunity for a journalist to make submissions on the issues that this gives rise to in the context of their work.

We believe that the Bill does not provide adequate protection of confidential journalistic material. This could seriously threaten journalistic inquiry and prevent a free press from doing its job, and the implications for our democracy are worrying. We are not alone in having those concerns; the BBC and many others have raised deep concerns about this part of the Bill. Amendment 18 is essential because it ensures that any protections afforded to our journalists in this Bill are not simply domestic but that other states that the Government enter into an agreement with must mirror the UK’s press safeguards.

Amendments 19 to 23, tabled by the Home Secretary and the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle, would introduce a requirement that notice must be given for all applications for journalistic material. It is vital that journalists can operate freely in the knowledge that Government cannot just seize their information on a whim. As I said, we very much welcome those amendments. However, I echo the concerns aired by the hon. Member for Torfaen about proposed new subsection (2B) and in particular the indelible offence override. I hope that the Minister can give us some comfort on that. Under the Bill, journalists would have a significantly reduced ability to engage in arguments about what is and is not suitable for disclosure, removing the opportunity for them to make submissions on the issues that give rise to that.

In conclusion, there have been clear improvements to the Bill, and we very much welcome those concessions. However, new clause 1 and the journalistic protections simply do not go far enough, and that is why we will back the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Torfaen.

3.30 pm

Sir Edward Davey: This is a very good Bill overall. It is much needed, and it is not controversial, which is why we will not vote against its Third Reading. However, our debates have shown that there is a chance to improve the Bill. Back Benchers have been able to improve the Bill, as we have seen with the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and strongly support his amendments, which are well judged, and I know that the BBC supports them, too. I also support Labour’s amendment 18. It is not unreasonable
to expect Government to try to ensure that there are protections for journalism and free expression in these treaties, and the world would expect Britain to uphold that. We hope to get agreement across the House on those amendments.

It is a shame that there is disagreement on the death penalty assurances. The Minister has been trying to reach out, but he will know that new clause 1 is only about seeking assurance, not receiving assurances, which is the issue at the heart of this disagreement. I intervened on the Minister earlier to ask whether there had been discussions about a carve-out for the types of offence that we are worried out. I would have thought that that would be incredibly easy, because the number of death penalty executions and cases that will result in it is tiny. I therefore would have thought that the US—a very practical people—would accept a treaty with that carve-out. The amendments tabled by my party and the Labour party would enable such a carve-out to be pushed forward. That is not unreasonable.

The Minister talks about the inequality of arms, and I get that—America is rather bigger than we are—but this is not about the Americans doing us a favour. We have data to offer them, too. It may only be 1%, but they want it. They want to catch their criminals—they want to catch the bad guys, too. We have a great record of working with them, and we should continue that. It is not as one-sided as he portrayed.

Let us remember what we are trying to achieve. A huge number of people in Congress and across America are campaigning to get rid of the death penalty. Nineteen US states no longer have the death penalty, and six of those have changed their laws since 2007 because of successful campaigning. That is one reason why we should stand up for this principle. This debate is live in the US, and it is important for not only the people we are talking about but US citizens that we send this signal. In addition to the states that have got rid of the death penalty, 11 states have not executed anyone for 10 years—it is de facto not used—so that makes 30 states. The federal Government have not executed anyone since 2003. The facts do not bear out the idea that we are pushing at a closed door and that there is massive opposition in the US political system.

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. He also highlights how very rare this is, which goes to the point about balance. This is not just about death penalty assurances. This is about the United States Administration saying, “You can’t have your cake and eat it. You want all this help and all this data, and you want us to take back foreign fighters and try them, but no sooner do we say yes than you start telling us how to do it and giving us conditions.” That is part of the overall assessment that the Government made in some other cases. In this case, the data has never been an issue in the past 20 years. That is why our judgment and the clear message from the United States Administration is that that would jeopardise the treaty.

Sir Edward Davey: I hear what the Minister says, and I know that he knows there is not a lot between us on this, because we are all trying to get to the same objectives. However, the points he makes could be argued against the US position, and because we are close allies, we could close that gap. It would not be terribly great for Senators to oppose this Bill—they have Senate ratification—as they would be held to account by their citizens for getting in the way of sharing information to catch paedophiles.

As British politicians here, from all sides and including the Minister, we should stand up for British principles. Yes, we want to catch these appalling criminals, but we must make sure that we advance justice and human rights. I do not think we should see these things as separate and deal with them separately—we can bring them together. It would be a good step for this House to stand up for this principle, which we all share and which is and has for a long time been Government policy, and say to our close friends in the US that we believe we can come to some agreement.

The Minister made it clear in his response that the treaty is still in development. The hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) talked about how a lot of people in the US, particularly in the State Department, are expecting us to do this, so it is not unreasonable that we do, and I hope that the Minister, who is highly respected across this House and whose Bill we utterly support, can understand why we are trying to make this extra push. We are doing this to help him in his negotiations.

John Woodcock: Listening to this debate, I found myself nodding along with the shadow Minister, as often I do. He made a well-honed speech about the bipartisan approach that has long been taken on the death penalty and the UK’s opposition to it on both sides. I tried to reconcile that with his party’s position, which is to oppose new clause 1. I was agreeing with what he was saying and I have some sympathy because the reasoned approach that he characteristically takes at the Front Bench is not matched by the diktat that comes down from the shadow Home Secretary and the leader of his party.

I have to say to the shadow Home Secretary: for the second time this week, she has ended up in a position where I and others are further to the left than her on a key issue. I sat behind her on Monday night, when she was explaining to the House why it was right to abstain on the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill. The Lords have rightly, and in a way that is welcome, forced a concession from the Government—to me, new clause 1 seems substantive in writing into the Bill the requirement for this and any future Government to seek assurances on the death penalty. As has been rightly said, that approach has long been practice but it was, in terms of extradition, in a way that was quite troubling, disregarded in the instance of Mohammed Emwazi and others.

New clause 1 has been tabled after pressure from the Lords. It is a step forward in legally codifying opposition to the death penalty. As I understand it, the Labour party is going to try to force its Members of Parliament to vote against it, in the hope that they will then get to an amendment which would be unworkable and would indeed wreck the chances of a treaty, as the Minister has convincingly set out. Assuming that new clause 1 goes through—I will certainly be voting for it and I am encouraging many Labour colleagues to vote for it or abstain—we are not, as I understand it, going to get to the Labour amendment, by which it appears to be setting store. I am afraid that that epitomises the deep
oppositional politics that has always been a hallmark of the shadow Home Secretary and the Leader of the Opposition. It is an example. I am afraid, of why it would be so deeply troubling for the nation if they were given the chance to stand at the other Dispatch Box and have the authority to act as Home Secretary and Prime Minister.

This seems to have been another week when precedents are changing in this House. As I understand it, the Labour Whip is no longer binding on either Back-Bench or Front-Bench MPs, and it seems to be possible for Labour Front-Bench MPs to break their own Whip and remain on the Front Bench. I do not know if there is a requirement to go and sit in the Smoking Room to be exempt from what would otherwise be the strictures of the Front Bench.

This means that Labour MPs are being forced into making a false choice on human rights. We have to uphold human rights as a country. If we do not uphold them, the law will bring the Government into line, as it may yet do in the case of the so-called “ISIS Beatles”. The Labour leadership are forcing a choice on this incredibly important action to gain the treaty to speed up action against paedophiles, and on action to be able to convict British terrorists. They are forcing their MPs to choose one or the other. It is a false choice and one that I hope MPs will reject. I hope they will vote for new clause 1, so that we can go ahead with a strengthened Bill, which the country needs.

Mr Wallace: With the leave of the House, let me say that the amendments have been well heard and well argued. Following what the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) has said, it is true that this is a false choice. This is real: it is about giving power to our law enforcement agencies to get data—data only; not the wider MLAT evidential packages, which are already covered by the overseas security and justice assistance guidance. Nor is it about extradition. It is simply about recognising the 21st century we live in, where the data is stored and the vital need for us to get it.

It is just wrong to tie this up with Trumpian ideology or anything else. It is not true. The shadow Home Secretary may like to note that it started under President Obama. We are not kowtowing to President Trump at all. This suggestion from our allies will help us to cut the time—from years and months to months and days—to get the vital data we need to protect our children and to protect us from terrorism.

Mark Pritchard: May I reach out to the Opposition? As the joint chairman of the all-party group on the abolition of the death penalty, I, like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), did have some concerns. However, I have addressed them with the Minister, who has listened. I think the Government have listened and I appeal to the shadow Minister and the Opposition Front-Bench team to think again in the national interest and in the interests of victims.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has campaigned against the death penalty for very many years and who, as co-chair of the all-party group, knows a thing or two about it. I do not think he would say that lightly if he did not feel it.

My shadow made some points about the judgment in the “Beatles” case, which is not of course related specifically to this data, but makes the point about exceptional circumstances. I urge him to read the judgment in full.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have.

Mr Wallace: Then the hon. Gentleman has quoted so selectively. If he has read it in full, he will know that all five points of allegation—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I said that.

Mr Wallace: Yes, but the hon. Gentleman did not expand on them. If he had, he would have said, for example, that the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales made it very clear that “the Government recognises and responds to the realities of political life in the state concerned, whether or not it likes those realities. It would be very odd indeed to ignore them. Ministers, diplomats and other officials are engaged in a constant process of evaluation, making judgements about the differences between what is said and what is meant; between what is threatened, explicitly or implicitly, and what is likely to happen; about the impact of action of the UK. That is what was done here. The Home Secretary had the advice of the British Ambassador…The suggestion that he was not entitled to take it into account and rely on that expert assessment when making his own judgement is misconceived.” The Lord Chief Justice recognises the political realities within which we operate in the course of trying to keep people safe in this nation. It is a great shame that the shadow Home Secretary cannot manage to recognise those realities when the Lord Chief Justice can.

Question put. That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 310, Noes 257.

Division No. 318

[3.45 pm]

Ayes

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Akins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berger, Luciana
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caullfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Ann
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
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Question accordingly agreed to.

New clause 1 read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 1

Making of overseas production order on application

Amendment proposed: 18, page 2, line 3, at end insert—

“(5A) The Secretary of State may only make regulations designating an international agreement under subsection (5) where that agreement—

(a) provides for safeguards and special procedures in respect of applications by competent authorities of a country or territory other than the United Kingdom for orders in respect of journalistic data and confidential journalistic data that are equivalent to those in this Act, and

(b) provides for at least as much protection for freedom of expression and the protection of journalists’ rights sources as Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and section 10 of the Contempt of Court Act 1981.” —[Nick Thomas-Symonds.]
The House divided:  Question put, That the amendment be made.

Division No. 319  [4.03 pm]

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Ali, Rushanara  
Amesbury, Mike  
Antoniacci, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Berrymans  
Bardell, Hannah  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Austin, Ian  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Amesbury, Mike  
Ali, Rushanara  
Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
De Cordova, Marsha  
Day, Martyn  
Davey, rh Mr Adrian  
Dabin, Nic  
Davies, Geraint  
Daly, Daniel  
De Cordova, Marsha  
De Piero, Gloria  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hoey, Kate  
Hollern, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Hosie, Stewart  
Howarth, rh Mr George  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Jardine, Christine  
Jarvis, Dan  
Johnson, Diana  
Jones, Darren  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Sarah  
Jones, Susan Elan  
Kane, Mike  
Keeley, Barbara  
Kendall, Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Kilren, Ged  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kyle, Peter  
Laird, Lesley  
Lake, Ben  
Lammy, rh Mr David  
Lavery, Ian  
Law, Chris  
Lee, Karen  
Leslie, Mr Chris  
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
Lewis, Clive  
Linden, David  
Lloyd, Stephen  
Lloyd, Tony  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Carol  
Lucas, Ian C.  
Lynch, Holly  
MacNeil, Angus Brendan  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
Mahmood, Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Mann, John  
Marsden, Gordon  
Martin, Sandy  
Maskell, Rachael  
Matheson, Christian  
Mc Nally, John  
McCabe, Steve  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McDonagh, Siobhan  
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
McDonald, Stuart  
McDonnell, rh John  
McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGinn, Conor  
McGovern, Alison  
McInnes, Liz  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorrin, Anna  
Mearns, Ian  
Milliband, rh Edward  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Graham  
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  
Phillips, Jess  
Philipson, Bridget  
Pidcock, Laura  
Platt, Jo  
Pollard, Luke  
Pound, Stephen  
Powell, Lucy  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Rayner, Angela  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Rees, Christina  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reeves, Rachel  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Rodda, Matt  
Rowley, Danielle  
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sharra, Mr Virendra  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaglton, Andy  
Smeth, Ruth  
Smith, Angela  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Nick  
Smith, Owen  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Graham  
Sobel, Alex  
Spellar, rh John  
Slarmer, rh Keir  
Stephens, Chris  
Stevens, Jo  
Stone, Jamie  
Streeting, Wes  
Sweeney, Mr Paul  
Swinson, Jo  
Tami, rh Mark  
Thewliss, Alison  
Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Stephen  
Twist, Liz  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaz, Valerie  
Walker, Thelma  
West, Catherine  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitfield, Martin  
Whitfield, Dr Philippa  

**NOES**

Debbonaire, Thangam  
Dent, Coad, Emma  
Dhesi, Mr Tamanjijeet  
Singh  
Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
Dodds, Annelise  
Dougherty, Stephen  
Dowd, Peter  
Drew, Dr David  
Dromey, Jack  
Duffield, Rosie  
Duffield, Rosie  
Ellman, Dame Louise  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Fellows, Marion  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Flint, rh Caroline  
Fovargue, Yvonne  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Frith, James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gaffney, Hugh  
Gapes, Mike  
Gardiner, Barry  
George, Ruth  
Gethins, Stephen  
Gibson, Patricia  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Glindon, Mary  
Godsell, 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  
Harman, rh Ms  
Harriet  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayman, Sue  
Healey, rh John  
Hendrick, Sir Mark  
Hendy, Drew  
Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
Hermon, Lady  
Hill, Mike  
Hillman, Paul  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hoey, Kate  
Hollern, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Hosie, Stewart  
Howarth, rh Mr George  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Jardine, Christine  
Jarvis, Dan  
Johnson, Diana  
Jones, Darren  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Sarah  
Jones, Susan Elan  
Kane, Mike  
Keeley, Barbara  
Kendall, Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Kilren, Ged  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kyle, Peter  
Laird, Lesley  
Lake, Ben  
Lammy, rh Mr David  
Lavery, Ian  
Law, Chris  
Lee, Karen  
Leslie, Mr Chris  
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
Lewis, Clive  
Linden, David  
Lloyd, Stephen  
Lloyd, Tony  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Carol  
Lucas, Ian C.  
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)  
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, Siobhan  
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  
Milliband, rh Edward  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Graham  
Murray, Ian  
Nandy, Lisa  
Newlands, Gavin  
Norris, Alex  
O’Hara, Brendan  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Osamor, Kate  
Owen, Albert  
Peach, Stephanie  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Philipson, Bridget  
Pidcock, Laura  
Platt, Jo  
Pollard, Luke  
Pound, Stephen  
Powell, Lucy  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Rayner, Angela  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Rees, Christina  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reeves, Rachel  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Rodda, Matt  
Rowley, Danielle  
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sharra, Mr Virendra  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaglton, Andy  
Smeth, Ruth  
Smith, Angela  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Nick  
Smith, Owen  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Graham  
Sobel, Alex  
Spellar, rh John  
Slarmer, rh Keir  
Stephens, Chris  
Stevens, Jo  
Stone, Jamie  
Streeting, Wes  
Sweeney, Mr Paul  
Swinson, Jo  
Tami, rh Mark  
Thewliss, Alison  
Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Stephen  
Twist, Liz  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaz, Valerie  
Walker, Thelma  
West, Catherine  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitfield, Martin  
Whitfield, Dr Philippa
Crime (Overseas Production Orders)  Bill [Lords]
30 JANUARY 2019

Tellers for the Ayes: Bamboo Charabambous and Jeff Smith

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, rh Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bolso, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brayton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Byrne, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chepe, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleveral, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djohuly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Dinenage, Caroline
Davies, Mims
Davies, David T. C.
Crouch, Tracey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Collins, Damian
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djohuly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel

Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Said
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keeghan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lettwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Mr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
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 Sherry
Morrison, 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
Philip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
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, Douglas
Ross, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scally, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rosyton
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir 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
Tollhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
This amendment defines “relevant evidence” as used in Amendment 2.

in relation to an offence, means anything that would be admissible

in the investigation.

This requirement does not apply where the order is sought for the purposes of a terrorist

Amendment 3, page 6, line 8, at end insert—

“(9A) For the purpose of subsection (5A), “relevant evidence”, in relation to an offence, means anything that would be admissible in evidence in proceedings in respect of the offence.”—(Mr Wallace.)

This amendment defines “relevant evidence” as used in Amendment 2.

Clause 6

Effect of order

Amendments made: 4, page 7, line 13, at end insert—

“(ba) does not require the person to do anything that

This amendment makes clear that a person against whom an

requirement does not apply where the order is sought for the purposes of a terrorist

Amendment 3, page 6, line 8, at end insert—

“(9A) For the purpose of subsection (5A), “relevant evidence”, in relation to an offence, means anything that would be admissible in evidence in proceedings in respect of the offence.”—(Mr Wallace.)

This amendment defines “relevant evidence” as used in Amendment 2.

Clause 10

Retention of electronic data and use as evidence

Amendment made: 6, page 9, line 21, at end insert—

“(1A) Subsection (1) does not authorise the doing of anything that

This amendment makes clear that a person against whom an

This amendment makes clear that a person against whom an overseas production order is made who is subject to the data protection legislation within the meaning of the Data Protection Act 2018 (see Amendment 7) is not required to do anything by way of compliance with the order which would result in the person contravening the data protection legislation, and

Amendment 5, page 7, line 14, after “effect” insert “, subject to paragraph (ba).”—(Mr Wallace.)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 4.

Clause 12

Notice of application for order; confidential journalistic data

Amendments made: 19, page 10, line 9, leave out subsection (1) and insert—

“(1) This section applies to an application for an overseas production order if there are reasonable grounds for believing that the electronic data specified or described in the application consists of or includes journalistic data.”

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 20.

Amendment 20, page 10, line 16, at end insert—

“(2A) Where this section applies, notice of the application must be served on—

(a) the person against whom the overseas production order is sought, and

(b) if different, the person by whom, or on whose behalf, the journalistic data is stored.

Clause 12 currently provides for an application for an overseas production order in respect of electronic data that consists of or includes confidential journalistic data to be on notice. As a result of this amendment, notice of an application need not be served on a person falling within subsection (2A)(b) if the judge is satisfied that—

(a) serving notice on the person would prejudice the investigation of an indictable offence or a terrorist investigation, or

(b) it is not reasonably practicable to establish the person’s identity or to make contact with the person so as to enable service to be effected.”

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 20.

Clause 15

Application of Act to service police

Amendment made: 23, page 13, line 10, leave out “section 4(3)(a)” and insert “sections 4(3)(a) and 12(2B)(a)”—(Mr Wallace.)

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 20.

Clause 17

Interpretation

Amendment made: 7, page 14, line 20, at end insert—

““the data protection legislation” has the same meaning as in the Data Protection Act 2018 (see section 3 of that Act).”—(Mr Wallace.)

This amendment inserts a definition of “the data protection legislation” in the provisions inserted into the Bill by Amendments 4 and 6.
This amendment of the long title of the Bill is consequential on NCI.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It came to my attention earlier on that the Secretary of State for Scotland is visiting my constituency tomorrow. I first became aware of the visit via lines in the local press about an announcement of funding for the Ayrshire growth deal. I have since received a ministerial notification, but it contains no details whatsoever. The information even has the wrong name for the venue—imagine that. My office has since asked the Scotland Office for more information, and we are still being told that it is just a simple visit to a local college, but that is completely contrary to the details in the press.

Of course, I welcome the potential announcement of £100 million for the Ayrshire growth deal. It has cross-party support, and everybody has worked hard to get it over the finishing line. However, it would be more appropriate to maintain such cross-party co-operation and, at the very least, to show due respect to me as the constituency MP by sharing the information that the Scotland Office has shared with the press. I am looking to you for guidance on the matter, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for giving me prior notice of it. I understand that he has also informed the Secretary of State for Scotland that he would be making it. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s annoyance at not being properly informed regarding the details of the visit, because that is what is expected. However, having raised the matter, I hope that he will get further clarification. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench have noted what he said and will ensure that the proper information is sent to him.

Third Reading

4.21 pm

Mr Wallace: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Throughout the process, the Bill has been about giving our law enforcement agencies a step change in capability to access the vital data needed to investigate some of the worst crimes perpetrated against our constituents. The House has spoken. We examined the Opposition’s amendment 18 and the amendments that mirrored those attempted in the House of Lords. A majority of 53 in rejecting amendment 18 sends a clear notice that Members in this House have considered the delicate balance between obligations and security and have favoured that we should send the Bill back to the Lords with the amendment rejected. I hope that their lordships will reflect on that.

This Bill is about the security of our children and our constituents and about taking up an offer made by President Obama’s Administration to help us with vital investigations where time is of the essence, so that we do not have to go down the long bureaucratic route of the MLAT process, which can take months or years. Indeed, I meet police officers who tell me that they cannot actually progress investigations as a result. When that process of obtaining vital data is turned into days and weeks, this House should be proud not only of our special relationship with the United States that has enabled this to happen, but of the fact that our police will be able to get the necessary data.

Members from across the House often quite rightly complain that data from faraway CSPs, such as Facebook and Google—data that is corrupting the internet and radicalising our families and our children—is being used to prosecute cybercrime and that we need to do more about that. We need to take action to stop such things happening. This Bill contains a strong measure offered by the US Administration, and it means that we will be able to do much more to keep our citizens safe. It is the responsible thing to do.

I have listened to suggestions throughout the Bill’s progress and have taken them into the Bill where and as much as possible, including on the protection and notification of journalists. I hope that the other place recognises the consensual way in which we have made progress on 90% of the Bill. We will be the first nation to have such an arrangement, although there is more work to be done around the treaty.

I do not know whether the Lords will send the Bill back—I pray that they do not—so I will say a grateful thanks to my Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who has done great work; to the usual channels; and to the Labour and SNP Front-Bench spokespeople, the Democratic Unionist party and the Liberal Democrats, who have all either accommodated offers or had the time to listen to me in private to try to resolve matters. I thank my officials and the Bill manager. This is her first Bill, and she was allocated a Bill that looked so boring and innocuous that there would be no controversy. Little did she know how our friends in the upper House would behave—I can only apologise for that. I thank the team for doing a sterling job. I hope that the Bill does not return and that we can look forward to its coming into law.

4.25 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I echo the Minister in saying that 90% of the Bill has been consensual, and a number of parties, including the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, Labour and others, have sought to contribute constructively throughout its passage.

The issue of death penalty assurances generated a great deal of controversy, but the Minister will have noticed that I indicated earlier that we would be supporting the Bill on Third Reading, irrespective of the outcome of previous votes. That remains our position, and I join him in his frustration with the slowness of the MLA T process. MLA T is a well-established process but, clearly, we need to look at speeding it up, and this Bill is a mechanism by which we can do that.

The Minister rightly focuses on America, partly because of the extent of the data it holds and partly because that treaty has been negotiated, and it will be a framework for other reciprocal treaties all around the world. Of course, he would expect me and the Opposition to scrutinise every single one of those treaties when they come before the House in due course. Parties on both sides of the House share the long-cherished principle of international human rights.
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I apologise for missing some of the debate on Report. Will my hon. Friend reassure us about the sources of intelligence information? There have been stories in the past about how our intelligence has been gained. Is he satisfied that there are enough safeguards to ensure those stories are not repeated?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Clearly, I do think the safeguards in the Bill have been significantly improved, which is one reason why I am content to support it. Obviously that is not to say there might not be legal challenges to aspects of the Bill in due course—there may well be—but I am pleased and content with many of the improvements that have been made. Throughout my time in this role I have tried to work consensually with the Minister, as has been the case with this Bill and others, and that will continue in the years ahead.

I join the Minister in thanking the Bill team. I have spoken to different members of the team over the course of the Bill’s passage. People did not necessarily expect the Bill to end up in this place when it began as a non-consensual Bill in the House of Lords. I also thank their lordships, the Minister and all the members of the Committee who contributed to the Bill. The time has come to move forward and to try to put in place this mechanism to speed up the exchange of information, with appropriate safeguards for keeping our citizens safe.

4.28 pm

Gavin Newlands: Every hon. Member would accept that the current wait times in the MLAT process are unsustainable. Notwithstanding the arguments made on Report and at earlier stages, we welcome the Bill and believe that investigations and proceedings relating to serious offences in Scotland will benefit from the use of overseas production orders as a quicker, more streamlined process for obtaining that data.

I am, of course, disappointed that we were unsuccessful in securing full death penalty and journalistic protections. The death penalty protection, at least, may come back to us. Despite the Minister’s tone at the start of the debate, I thank him for his approach to this Bill and to the other Bills on which the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) and I have worked.

I thank the hon. Members for Torfaen and for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin). It has been a somewhat easier and more enjoyable—if that can be the word—experience for having worked together so well. I also thank the Clerks in the Public Bill Office and the various organisations that have provided briefings for Members.

The Minister was right—and he reiterated it—when he said that this was an important but essentially boring Bill. The Minister, the shadow Minister and I find ourselves in a lot of Committees considering Bills that could easily be described as boring, and I am sure that after last night’s vote that may well be the case again very soon. So I shall see them soon, I imagine.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.
The House divided: Ayes 289, Noes 245.

Division No. 320] [4.33 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Alfray, Adam
Alidus, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, rh Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cautfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Donnies, Ms Nadine
Douglas, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evelyn, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallow, rh Sir Michael
Ford, Vicki
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
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
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harrison, Trudy
Harri, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingsbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howells, Rhodri
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughs, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Kenin, Sir Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jennic, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morton, Wendy
Murray, Mrs Sherrill
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
O'Brien, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
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
Rосindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Rosyton
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sutak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Symms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Toothur, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaiez, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shaihesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Cadbury, Ruth
Butler, Dawn
Burgon, Richard
Burden, Richard
Buck, Ms Karen
Brown, Mr Nicholas
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, Sir Ronnie
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alun
Brown, Sir Norman
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Dhliam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Cherry, Joanna
Ciwyz, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddes, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Duffyield, Rosie

Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellrs for the Ayes: Amanda Milling and Rebecca Harris

Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fellows, Marion
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, Prent Kaur
Giindon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Heppburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald

Jones, Graham P.
Jones, rh Mr Keivan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Ged
Kinlock, Stephen
Kiley, Peter
Laid, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tam)
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhan
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brenda
Onn, Melanie
Onurwah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew

Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pldcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Russell-Moiy, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, rh Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Theliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasir, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellrs for the Noes: Jeff Smith and Bambo Charalambous

Question accordingly agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).
### Exiting the European Union (Health Care and Associated Professions)

That the draft European Qualifications (Health and Social Care Professions) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 20 December 2018, be approved.—(Wendy Morton.)

*Question agreed to.*

### Exiting the European Union (Health Care and Associated Professions)

That the draft European Qualifications (Pharmacists) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2018, which were laid before this House on 6 December 2018, be approved.—(Wendy Morton.)

*Question agreed to.*

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#### Delay Repay: Great Eastern Main Line

*Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Wendy Morton.)*

4.46 pm

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): We are starting this debate somewhat early, and it happens to be a debate on rail delays. Looking at the time, I can work out that I have approximately two and a half hours, which the House will be pleased to know I have no intention of filling. Ironically, though, it does happen to be the longest delay I have ever encountered, personally, on a Greater Anglia train—and that is a fact.

I am hugely grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of Delay Repay 15 on the great eastern main line. It is an issue that is hugely important to thousands of my Colchester constituents who are regular rail users and commuters. To set the scene, as a rail user myself, I know that sadly—as commuters regularly, in fact almost daily, remind me on Twitter and via email—our rail service is often lacking, with short forms, delays, dirty trains, poor communication, and regular line, points, overhead wire or signal faults. My constituents and I have experienced every kind of delay possible, whether it is snow, ice, leaves, rats, or being too hot or too cold. It is quite incredible to think how other countries run effective rail services.

It is hard to feel convinced, and certainly to convince constituents, that we receive good value for money when the situation appears to be getting worse while rail fares and car-parking charges increase. I would never seek to presume or know what the Minister may be thinking, but I would hazard a guess: that complaints on social media are common enough, and that very rarely will anyone tweet their local MP to say, “My train’s arrived perfectly on time—please thank the Transport Minister on my behalf.” Perhaps he is thinking that this issue, while important, may be over-inflated by grumpy rail users like myself. I find the situation to be the complete opposite. I think that people have got so fed up with complaining about rail services that they have given up complaining about rail services.

Before we get off on the wrong track—there will not be too many bad puns—let us adopt a more statistical approach. The national rail passenger survey of more than 25,000 passengers in autumn 2017 has made something clear. For the avoidance of confusion, I have stripped the dataset down to the 1,493 Greater Anglia passengers involved in the survey. It is starkly but unsurprisingly clear that we are experiencing the lowest overall satisfaction with Greater Anglia services for over five years. On delays, which is the subject of this debate, only 32% of commuters are satisfied with Greater Anglia’s track record. The punctuality and reliability of services was also consistently ranked the single most important consideration for commuters.

Things have not improved much since autumn 2017. In the past 48 hours, we have seen in the press that Greater Anglia passengers have become significantly less satisfied with their journeys over the past 12 months. According to new figures from the rail watchdog Transport Focus, only 73% of passengers were satisfied with their journeys on Greater Anglia. That figure was 81% in its survey the previous year.
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, which I welcome. He is a great campaigner on this issue. One cause of dissatisfaction among our constituents on this line is the fact that they so often have to stand. Does he agree that we should look at compensation for not only delays but standing? Is it right that someone who stands, often for two hours or more, pays the same fare as someone who has a seat?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is right; nobody should be standing on a train for this length of time. Nobody should be standing to get to London Liverpool Street from average commuter towns like Chelmsford or Colchester, or even as far as Norwich. The journey from Chelmsford is about 40 minutes, from Colchester it is about 55 minutes and from Norwich it is one hour and 45 minutes or even two hours; we hope to get that down to one hour and 45 minutes with the new trains. Increased capacity will come with the new trains, but there is huge issue with standing. It is not uncommon to see people—indeed, I have done it myself—standing between Colchester and London. That is not acceptable.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The west coast main line is not as bad, but we often have cancellations, and people stand at Euston waiting but are not told the reason for the cancellation. There is an argument for new rolling stock, whether on the hon. Gentleman’s line or the west coast main line. I agree with his point about fares. The public have got so used to fares being increased that they feel helpless to do anything about it. Fares are far too high now.

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Fares are an interesting point. Of course everyone would like to see rail fares come down, but most people say that they want their fare to represent better value for money. We are fortunate that we are getting a brand new fleet of trains, at a cost of some £1.4 billion, but to set that in context, we have waited in some cases 40 years for it. Some of our rolling stock is decades old—in fact, I think some of it even breaches standards in 2019, so it needs to be replaced in any event.

I think the public are clear about what they want: punctual services. In the unfortunate event that that is not possible, adequate compensation for the delay must be available. I would be the first to argue that we should focus our efforts on improving the reliability of the service. Rail users would rather not face delays than receive compensation.

I have raised this issue numerous times with Greater Anglia, which has assured me and colleagues that it is investing more than £20 million in improving the performance of its existing trains. As I mentioned, it is also engaged in a £1.4 billion investment programme over the next two years to replace its current models with new trains, the first of which are due to enter service on the line this year. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), that will increase capacity on our line, with 1,043 carriages available compared with 937 at the moment. That is good news. It is long overdue—sadly, like some of the trains leaving Colchester—but I welcome these announcements.

We must not forget Network Rail, as most of the delays on our line fall under its remit. Members of Parliament from across our region, ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), have called for repair and renewal work on our line as part of the great eastern main line taskforce. We have helped to secure £2 billion as a funding settlement for our line, and we will start to see the benefits of these works in reduced delays and disruption.

I wish to touch on the sensitive and incredibly sad issue of suicide, as I know that fatalities on the line are often the cause of the longest delays. I want to reassure rail users that Members of Parliament from across this House on our line have been working closely with Greater Anglia, Network Rail and the Department to do all we can to put measures in place to try to reduce and minimise the number of people who are, tragically, taking their own lives on our lines.

I hope I have set out why there are good reasons for optimism. I appreciate that I was relatively disparaging about our rail service to start with, but a lot of constituents would feel exactly the same.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): Although we are in the same region, I have a different rail line, with a huge variety of rail providers involved on that line. We have had a 100% increase in capacity, lots more seats, a huge range of wi-fi on some of the trains, yet passengers remain frustrated about value for money and the challenges on punctuality. How does my hon. Friend feel we can tackle that value for money problem?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I used to live in his constituency, so I know that rail line well. I understand that the trains have improved somewhat since I lived there. When we ask rail users what they want, most of them say that they want reliability, a punctual service, a plug socket and to be able to get a seat. Ideally, they would also like wi-fi. So speed is important, but it is usually a factor that is further down the list. Those are basically the core component of what people want and expect in terms of value for money, and I hope the Minister will address that in a little more detail.

As I said, I hope I have set out why there are good reasons for optimism about the great eastern main line. We have an entire new fleet of trains coming, with a significant investment in rail infrastructure, which should lead to a reduction in disruption and delays. However, that cannot and must not be used as an argument against the rapid introduction of Delay Repay 15 on the great eastern main line.

On 13 October, we had some welcome news from the Department, as the Secretary of State announced an improved compensation scheme—Delay Repay 15. Under this scheme, passengers are able to claim 25% of the cost of a single fare tickets for delays of between 15 and 29 minutes. The scheme would go a long way towards incentivising improved efficiencies in the franchise and compensating commuters for the inconvenience suffered as a result of delayed services. Delay Repay 15 has already been rolled out on Thameslink, Southern and the Great Northern franchises, but not on the great eastern main line under Greater Anglia.

As I know from my own train journeys between Colchester and Liverpool Street, the smallest delay to a daily commute can cause, over time, significant disruption
to our professional lives, especially in the mornings, and significance inconveniences to our private lives in the evening—it can make the difference between being able to tuck one’s kids into bed at night or not. We should not underestimate the importance of that. Ultimately, like most of my fellow rail users, I would rather the reliability of the service be vastly improved first, but I know that my constituents would also welcome the introduction of improved compensation rights.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this Adjournment debate, and I apologise for not being here for the start of his speech. I absolutely agree with the whole campaign, which is brilliant. Our passengers deserve this. Does he agree that any compensation scheme needs also to be easy to use and that Greater Anglia needs not only to introduce Delay Repay 15, but to make its current scheme more user friendly, so that when people try to claim compensation, they are not blocked from doing so?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and for the role he plays on the great eastern main line taskforce. One reason why it has been so successful is that all the MPs from our region have spoken collectively with one voice, taking the politics out of the issue, and have focused on the main issues that are going to drive improvements on our line. We work closely together on that.

On the specific point about Delay Repay, the hon. Gentleman made a very good point. There is little point in having a compensation scheme if it is so hard and difficult to operate—it is not user-friendly—that people do not use it. There are of course people who will not bother with it or, for whatever reason, choose not to use it. Some choose to make a charitable donation, and the figure to date for what people across our region have chosen to donate, instead of receiving that money back, is somewhere in the region of £8,000. I agree entirely with him that it is important—in fact, imperative—that we make these Delay Repay schemes as easy and as user-friendly as possible. We should ensure people know how to do it, so it is important that the information is easy to use and that Greater Anglia needs not only to introduce Delay Repay 15, but to make its current scheme more user friendly, so that when people try to claim compensation, they are not blocked from doing so.

The Secretary of State rightly said back in October 2016 “it is vital that they are compensated fairly.” The stated policy of the Department for Transport is to move all franchise operators to Delay Repay 15 as new franchises are let. I welcome this decision, but there is one big problem. Currently, Delay Repay 15 has been rolled out only on franchises that were let after October 2016. Herein lies our issue: the Greater Anglia franchise started in October 2016, but the franchise agreement was signed in August 2016. Eligibility for Delay Repay 15 has therefore been denied to the great eastern main line for a number of years as a consequence of a handful of weeks or even, dare I say, days. The irony is not lost on me that it is a timetabling issue that has delayed the introduction of Delay Repay 15 on our line. [Interruption.] That was poor, I appreciate.

Passengers on the great eastern main line are still only offered the original Delay Repay scheme, which compensates customers for the occasions on which they are delayed for 30 minutes or more, not the improved Delay Repay scheme for delays of 15 minutes or more. I can assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that it is quite incredible how many journeys are 27, 28 or 29 minutes late. I have been on many of them, and 29 minutes is quite a long time to be delayed, even when it affords a good opportunity to take in some of the beautiful north Essex countryside. [Interruption.] And, indeed, Suffolk, which I believe is also very beautiful.

What I am concerned about—hence this debate—is that if Delay Repay 15 is rolled out if the franchise is re-let on the same timetable as its predecessor scheme, passengers on our line will not have access to the DR15 scheme until October 2025, when the current franchise ends. That would be totally unacceptable. Fortunately, in November 2016 the Government stated their intention to explore the roll-out of Delay Repay 15 during that Parliament. Subsequently, in February 2018, the former Minister of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), confirmed in a written response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham:

“The Department has received a proposal from Greater Anglia in relation to implementing Delay Repay 15 before their present contract expires. This proposal is in the early stages of being reviewed and analysed to determine whether it is affordable and represents value for money.”

May I ask the Minister what progress has been made in these talks, which were in their early stages one year ago? I am calling on the Department for Transport to ensure that talks with Greater Anglia are fast-tracked to ensure that great eastern main line rail users have the same compensation rights as rail users in other parts of our country. The current situation only entrenches a postcode lottery in a system in which those who use the great eastern main line are less protected from delay and less entitled to compensation than users in other parts of our country.

It seems to me that it is certainly time that Delay Repay 15 was introduced on the great eastern main line. I hope to hear from the Minister that he can offer me and the many rail users on our line—the tens of thousands of rail users—some assurances on this matter and update me on the progress in the talks with Greater Anglia. I really hope that, in the next few weeks and months, we can get this nailed and make sure that our constituents and rail users have exactly the same rights as other rail users up and down our country.

5.4 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I rise to speak in this Adjournment debate to give my extraordinarily strong support to my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and colleagues from across the east of England in the campaign to improve the Delay Repay compensation for users of the great eastern main line and specifically to ask the Minister to introduce a 15-minute Delay Repay scheme.

The price of a season ticket from Chelmsford to London is now £5,168. People are paying a huge amount of money to travel on our trains, and when they are delayed or fail to show up, people should be compensated. We must hold the train operators to account. Other parts of the country offer 15-minute Delay Repay services to commuters and rail customers. We rail users in Essex, Suffolk and throughout East Anglia should not be treated as second-class passengers.
This is not the first time I have spoken on Delay Repay in this House; according to Hansard, I have raised the issue four times in ministerial questions. I remember once running into the House from the train station because my train from Chelmsford had been so delayed that morning—I arrived only just in time to ask my question. The Secretary of State has said on the Floor of the House that he hopes that Delay Repay will be introduced this year. I hope that the Minister will be able to give further reassurance.

In Chelmsford, my constituents have faced continual delays and cancellations, especially over the past 12 months. They have also faced situations where trains that were promised to be 12 carriages long turned out to have only eight or four carriages. Chelmsford railway station is the busiest two-platform station anywhere in the country. When trains are shortened or cancelled, it becomes incredibly overcrowded very quickly, putting passengers in danger.

Sometimes passengers cannot get on to the next train. Even though they turned up and hoped to get on a train that in theory was leaving on time, they simply could not get on to it, because it was overcrowded. It has been a complete nightmare, particularly last summer in the heatwave when the air conditioning did not work on many ancient carriages, some of which are 40 years old. Many carriages were taken out of service, so we had more and more short-formed trains.

The good news is that new trains are coming. The vast amount of money—£1.4 billion—that will be spent on brand new trains and rolling stock is really welcome, but my constituents have waited a very long time for those trains. They need to get fair value for money for the service that they are receiving today.

While I have the Minister’s ear, I shall refer to some other issues surrounding the rail service. The new trains will help, but as I said, we are the busiest two-platform station anywhere in the country. We have waited at least 20 years for the promised second railway station in Chelmsford. We are building tens of thousands of homes across the Chelmsford district and more widely across our neighbouring district, and a second railway station has been promised for at least 20 years.

I was delighted to hear today that plans are afoot for that railway station in north Chelmsford to become a passing loop, which will help passengers from all across the east of England. A passing loop north of Chelmsford will allow more trains to run along the whole network, so it will be a significant infrastructure improvement. However, we still have to wait many years before that promised railway station comes online, and we still do not have the full commitment for funding. I ask the excellent Minister to look at how we can speed up plans to get that second railway station built in Chelmsford, not just for the people of Chelmsford, but for rail passengers up and down the region.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend refers to the Beaulieu Park station, which is important not just for Chelmsford but for the whole great eastern main line, because it affords us the opportunity to create two passing loops between Chelmsford and Colchester. That will hugely increase capacity on our line.

Vicky Ford: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point so clearly. The passing loop will provide the incredibly overcrowded train line that goes across the east of England with much more capacity, and that will enable stopping trains to be overtaken by fast trains. That will help people at Colchester and the people who then travel on from Colchester to areas such as Clacton and the stations in between. It will help the people of Norwich and Ipswich, because their trains will be able to overtake at that key point. Rail Minister, this would give us not just a train station but a passing loop—two bits of infrastructure for the price of one. We really must bring it on board.

We have waited many, many months for our 15-minute Delay Repay. As I have said, other parts of the country already have it. Let us get it in the east of England. We should not have a second-class railway service. I will continue to fight for the service my commuters deserve.

5.10 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend for Colchester (Will Quince) on securing this debate on a perennial concern for my constituents.

I have lost count of the number of times I have received contact, through social media, email and written correspondence, from my commuters about the Braintree branch line to Liverpool Street. Even from the start of this year, my private office has been inundated with correspondence about the service—the lack of service and the delays to services—my commuters receive. Braintree, the town after which my constituency is named, is the last station on a branch line. This debate is rightly about the introduction of Delay Replay, but my hon. Friend is completely right that ideally we want a situation where my constituents and commuters do not have to rely on repayment or compensation for delayed services. What they really want are regular and reliable services.

All of us who use the railway line understand that, as a branch line service, we have a limited number of trains at our disposal—typically about a train an hour. It is therefore so very important that we are at the forefront of the train operating company’s priorities. If a train is delayed or cancelled, my constituents are presented with a tough choice: find some means of transporting themselves to Witham, which is where the branch line joins the main line; go into town to Chelmsford for the availability of car parking spaces; or phone work to make their apologies and excuses. That is not a decision that anyone would wish to have regularly forced upon them.

My constituents want to know that, when they turn up at the station, the train that is meant to depart at a certain time will depart at that time and get them to work on time. I have heard anecdotal reports of a number of people losing their jobs or being refused job opportunities because they are unable to get the reliability they need in their working lives—a direct result of the unreliability of the service on my branch line.

Will Quince: I have heard similar anecdotal cases. We must not forget that people do not just have issues getting to work; they need to get home, too. A lot of people have childcare providers. If parents are not back by a particular time, there is a real issue. People are in effect having to make a choice about whether they take
a job that involves commuting into London. That affects our economy, and it affects people’s personal, social and family lives. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is not acceptable?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Work-life balance is very important. We recognise that commercial activity underpins the funding of public services—that is key—but life balance is also really important. My hon. Friend is the father of two lovely little girls, and I know that he is very proud of them. All of us want to be able to make a commitment to our families, but that is detrimentally affected when services are cancelled and delayed.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): We suffer in Clacton, too, as we are at the end of the line, as my hon. Friend knows. I have a very large number of letters in my mailbox about cancellations and delays. That also happens at weekends—some of my constituents work at weekends—and we have many replacement bus services. That must be dealt with, too. We must have a good weekend service for people who travel not only for work but for leisure activities.

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester rightly focused on Delay Repay, and I echo his calls. I will not repeat the requests he made of the Minister—from where I am standing, I can see the copious notes that the Minister has written, so I know he has made a note of that point. There are other things that I would like him to consider. I wrote to him recently about this issue, and he assured me that I will have a reply in good time. I will not chase him on that, because I know that mine is not the only correspondence he has received about this issue.

On encouraging people to use more environmentally friendly modes of transport, I find it difficult to have a meaningful conversation with my constituents about leaving their cars behind. It is very difficult for me to persuade even people who live in Braintree, who have the best opportunity to step away from the internal combustion engine, because their immediate response is, “Well, James, I have to rely on my car because I cannot rely on the trains.” The lack of reliability therefore has an impact not just on train services, but on more environmentally friendly modes of transport.

One of the issues that I brought up with Greater Anglia and that is linked to Delay Repay is the importance of speedy and accurate communications when things go wrong. Everybody is frustrated if a train is delayed or cancelled, but there is perhaps nothing more frustrating than waiting at the station not knowing whether the train is delayed and not having enough facts to make choices about credible alternative methods of transport.

When trains are delayed, my constituents must decide whether to walk back to their house to get their car to drive to another station and to park there, or whether to make alternative arrangements and change their childcare. If they decide to get in their car and move, there is little more frustrating than seeing the train that they could have been on pull out. Communication is therefore key.

Vicky Ford: I want to reinforce my hon. Friend’s point. The national rail passenger survey results have just been published, and the satisfaction of our railway users has dropped significantly. They are particularly dissatisfied with the information and complaints process. Some 48%—nearly one in every two passengers—report that they are dissatisfied with how information and complaints are dealt with. I back my hon. Friend. Friend up on this. Minister, we have to get clearer information to passengers. There is no excuse not to; that really could make a difference.

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The final point that I want to make is that my commuters—I am sure this is true of all commuters across the region—are not unreasonable people. They are pragmatic. They understand that the rolling stock is old and is in the process of being replaced. They recognise that the route into London is going through a refurbishment and upgrade programme, which causes disruptions. Even though they pay the same amount of money for their season ticket as people on the main line, they recognise that they are on a branch line, which has certain disadvantages. They are sensible, pragmatic, reasonable people. That said, their patience is not an ever-filling well. When I hosted a public meeting last spring, the passion—I will put it no stronger than that—of my commuters and their desire to see the service and the communication improved and to see Delay Repay introduced in a timely manner cannot be overstated.

I have no doubt that the Minister has heard the concerns of colleagues representing this area, and he knows what we want first and foremost, but I hope that, if he can get a resolution on Delay Repay, he will then turn his mind to other enduring challenges, such as improving communication and wi-fi.

Giles Watling: On communication, it is all very well having Delay Repay—it is good to have it being communicated to passengers—but when Delay Repay 15 is introduced, it must be splashed widely so that everybody knows how to use it and that it is there. Surely that is the point.

James Cleverly: Yes, indeed; it would be good news, and I would strongly urge both the Department and the train operating company to be very vocal if we get it introduced in a timely manner, because it would be welcomed.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) on securing this debate and on giving us the opportunity to discuss these issues. I thank other hon. Members for their contributions. We have had a very positive debate.

I fully recognise the importance of the rail service to the communities my hon. Friends represent. It is not just a question of access to the beautiful landscapes of north Essex or south Suffolk; the line serves areas of economic growth, where we are seeing innovative businesses, high-tech and state-of-the-art businesses, and growth in life sciences and renewable energy. The great eastern main line plays a significant role in unlocking the economic potential and improving quality of life in the areas my hon. Friends represent.

I also fully acknowledge the passion that rail can generate. As people have said, the constant struggle to know what is happening on a network and the impact
Andrew Jones: The principle underpinning Delay Repay is that people should be compensated for any inconvenience caused, which brings me back to the intervention I made on my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). Given that a seat is part of a person’s understanding of the contract of their ticket, if they have had to stand for the entire journey, is there not a principle that they should be entitled to recompense?

Andrew Jones: It would be very challenging to introduce that extra condition to the compensation structures. We must try to ensure that there are enough seats, but it is hard to guarantee that everyone will have a seat on every occasion. The right to a seat is not actually included in the ticket—the ticket entitles the passenger to ride and to complete the journey, but not to have a seat—although of course we want passengers to have comfortable seats, along with access to wi-fi, power sockets and so forth. I am aware of the issue that my hon. Friend has raised, and I will certainly give it further consideration.

We introduced Delay Repay 15 in Britain’s largest rail franchise, Govia Thameslink, on 11 December 2016, and it was introduced in c2c in February 2018. It is also part of the new South Western and West Midlands franchises, and was introduced most recently in the Northern franchise, last December. It will be a contractual requirement for all other Department for Transport franchises when contracts come up for renewal, so it will become a regular feature of what our rail service looks like up and down the country.

Greater Anglia currently offers Delay Repay 30. We have been actively engaged with the company to secure an affordable and value-for-money scheme for the Delay Repay 15 launch, and the process of agreeing on commercial terms is at an advanced stage. We are not quite there yet, but I can tell Members that I am confident of being able to bring them some news within weeks. I will, of course, ensure that I keep everyone informed of our progress. The Department is doing significant work in liaising with Greater Anglia. The delays in introducing the scheme in franchises are due to the complications involved in changing the nature of the contractual arrangements, and that is the only reason for the delay in this instance.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for telling us that he hopes we will be able to hear more news about Delay Repay within weeks. We have talked a great deal about the complaints that are received, and I receive many, but when we do positive things for our commuters, they really appreciate it. On 2 January I received this little message from one of the younger commuters in my constituency:

“I just got my millennial railcard and will be saving…£1,000 this year! All thanks to a Conservative Government!”

The introduction of this compensation scheme will be greatly appreciated.

Andrew Jones: As ever, my hon. Friend has made a very wise point. On 2 January, the industry introduced the millennial railcard for those aged up to 30, as well as a railcard for 16 and 17-year-olds. Everyone up to the age of 30 now has access to discounted fares via a railcard. We want to ensure that more people have access to our railway.

There have been a few questions about how the rail operating companies handle compensation claims. The Office of Rail Regulation recently published the figures for delay compensation claims settled within the industry target of 20 working days during rail periods 1 to 7. Greater Anglia achieved 99.7% compliance, which means that passengers are receiving their compensation in a timely manner. Figures published by the Department in October last year showed that Greater Anglia is among the leading train operating companies in terms of its passenger compensation claim rate. The research also showed that Greater Anglia is the most proactive TOC on Twitter, accounting for 72% of tweets.

Will Quince: I thank the Minister for giving way again. He is being incredibly generous. May I suggest that one of the reasons why Greater Anglia is so prolific on Twitter is the fact that it has so many rail users who tweet complaints to it, which it has to respond to?

Andrew Jones: I do not quite accept that. We can see passenger numbers. We can see when performances fall. Since taking this role 10 weeks ago, I have found my inner train spotter, and I now look at the train performance of franchise operators several times a day. So my hon. Friend’s claim that Greater Anglia is among the worst performers in the country is, I am afraid, not correct.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I apologise for joining the debate late; my train was late. More seriously, however, I am pleased to see the Essex posse here in strength this evening, including my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) sitting on the Treasury Bench as the Whip, who unfortunately therefore takes the vow of omertà but who I am sure is with us in spirit.
The problem on the Southend Victoria line operated by Greater Anglia is long-running engineering works, which have been running for two years. We have had some good news from Network Rail that they will now end in the spring of 2020 rather than May 2021. My constituents welcome that, but all the time they are still paying over £5,000 for a season ticket from Rayleigh when they can barely use the service at weekends because there are so many bus services. I have asked Greater Anglia repeatedly to give at least a small discount to my constituents, basically to say, “We share your pain,” and I wonder whether the Minister would have any sympathy with long-suffering commuters who pay a great deal of money to Greater Anglia for what is basically essentially a glorified bus service.

Andrew Jones: I am always keen to see value delivered, and I recognise that passengers have to endure a degree of inconvenience or worse when the industry is working on maintaining the network. I am not sure whether we could go so far as to say that that should be a part of compensation, because we can see looking ahead increased investment. We are investing more in our railways than any Government in British history. We have to try to do this in a way that inconveniences as few people as possible, but at the same time recognise that the benefits will be profound and we are catching up on historical underinvestment. It is fair to say that Governments of all colours have underinvested in our transport infrastructure, but that is not an accusation that can be made against this one.

Mr Francois: I thank the Minister for giving way again; I realise that he is tight for time. We have been hearing from Greater Anglia for several years about these new trains, which are going to be the Concorde of the 21st century on rails, with wi-fi and better seats and all the rest of it. However, we can have the best train in the world, but if it is stuck in the depot because the line is closed because engineering works are going on, it is no good to us. I am just trying to convey to the Minister, who is new in the post but I know personally is an excellent Minister—I say that dead straight—the sense of genuine frustration from my constituents that they pay a lot of money for a line that they cannot use for many days of the year, even if the trains will be the best in the world.

Andrew Jones: There is no doubt whatsoever that we do sometimes test the patience of constituents who are enduring delays and constant bus replacement services beyond a pleasant and comfortable level, and the constituents of Rayleigh are well represented by my right hon. Friend.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: I am more than happy to give way; I do not think we are under quite the time pressure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) thinks we are.

Mrs Badenoch: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being exceedingly generous. It would not be right for me to hear about an Adjournment debate on Greater Anglia without talking about the issues in my constituency. While I am not on the great eastern main line, I am on the west, and I cannot help but pick the Minister up on his point about how well it is doing. I want to add my voice to echo my colleagues’ concerns. I get lots of letters from constituents who are dissatisfied. Is there something the Minister can do to look again at these statistics that show how well Greater Anglia is doing, because I think many of us would dispute them?

Andrew Jones: I am coming on to the performance of the company, so I will address that point, if I may, in a few moments.

First, let me pick up where we left off on communication, a key point raised by my hon. Friends for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) and for Braintree. I entirely agree that it is appropriate for the train operating companies to work extra hard to keep passengers informed when things go wrong, or when new services become available. I am not sure that this is a strength of our rail industry as a whole, but I have certainly raised it with the industry. I have talked to most of the TOCs over the past few weeks and have highlighted one thing above all, which is that I want to see a focus on operational excellence to deliver the most punctual network we can. I want them to focus their attention on customers and their communication with customers.

Stephen McPartland: I welcome the massive investment that the Government are making in our railways after many years of underinvestment. Does the Minister accept that a lot of the problems on the railways are the responsibility of Network Rail, a state-owned operator, and that local people feel that it is often unaccountable?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes an informed point. About 70% of the delays on our rail network are caused by works by Network Rail rather than by the train operating companies, so it is appropriate that we put the focus where the cause is. I am not in any way trying to suggest that Greater Anglia is perfect; I am just trying to put this in context. The hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) raised a point about the compensation scheme currently in place. Greater Anglia is one of the better rated companies in that regard. Contact and payment details can be stored in passengers’ online accounts so that they do not have to fill in their details each time they make a claim, and delay compensation claims can be made via the Greater Anglia app. The principle of keeping things simple and easy for passengers is absolutely paramount, and I agree with his underlying point on that. We have spent a bit of time talking about Delay Repay, and I want to confirm that that is an absolute priority. Colleagues have asked for my assurance that we will be putting our energy into bringing this over the line as soon as possible, and I am happy to provide that assurance. This is work in progress, and I will ensure that everyone is kept informed of the progress being made.

I want to talk bit about some of the other issues that have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester talked about the new trains, and they are indeed coming down the line. I am particularly keen that the current performance of Greater Anglia and Network Rail should continue to improve. Their performance is starting to improve, although there was a difficult autumn period with a mixture of infrastructure faults and train faults—as well as some fatalities; a powerful point was made about the number of suicides...
on our lines—and that has an impact on people. Every single case is obviously an appalling personal tragedy, and that must be borne in mind in any comments that we make. It is also worth noting that the suicide rate in the UK is at a 30-year low. We have seen a fall in the suicide rate on the railways in the past year or so, but it has not been so marked as across the country as a whole.

We have a secure station scheme, which involves an accreditation run through the British Transport police. It has been running for 20 years, and it was refreshed last year to include measures to combat suicide and self-harm. I would be keen to hear from colleagues of any problem areas on the rail network, because I am keen that we should do all we can to help in this regard. That is why we have renewed the secure station scheme to include training and to focus on trying to minimise suicide and self-harm. This is an important point. It is not just about the delays, obviously; it is also about the practical nature of dealing with the intense personal tragedies involved in each case.

Sandy Martin: I believe in giving praise where it is due, and in this particular case I believe that we should give praise to Greater Anglia for the project that it is running—I believe in conjunction with Mind—to help staff to deal with these problems and to reduce the number of suicides on the railways. I really hope that that scheme will be successful as well.

Andrew Jones: That is an important point well made. Up and down the country, we see TOCs partner with either public bodies or, as in this case, successful and important charities. The British Transport Police and the secure station scheme work with the Railway Children and the Samaritans, for example, and such partnerships can make and are making a difference.

I mentioned that performance has been mixed over the autumn period, but it is starting to improve. Looking at the public performance measures, Greater Anglia’s PPM for the period ending 5 January was 89.7%, which should be compared with the target in the franchise agreement of 88.7%. However, we want to go even further. We want all passengers on our network to receive the best possible service.

Giles Watling: We are at the end of the line down in Clacton and Walton-on-the-Naze, and it feels like the further away a place is, the more it gets ignored. Will the Minister please give some reassurance to my commuters that their train times will improve?

Andrew Jones: I can absolutely confirm to my hon. Friend that trains cannot go beyond the end of the line, because it then gets very wet. However, there is no way that different parts of the network are being treated disproportionately. There is an even approach, and everybody is entitled to a good service. That is what we are working towards. The Department’s work with the train operating company looks at performance as a whole, not individual parts, so I assure my hon. Friend that his concerns are being addressed.

I was talking about how we want to go further. The target is to have over 92% of trains arriving on time by the end of the franchise. Together with Network Rail, the train operating company needs to manage day-to-day performance and ensure that passengers see performance improve. It is my priority to see our trains provide an excellent service that delivers a network upon which commuters and passengers can rely every day.

Many colleagues have mentioned new trains. Greater Anglia has a great initiative, but it is part of a bigger scheme right across the country. Some 7,000 new carriages will be entering service on our network over the next two years, and the change is comparable to the UK’s move from diesel to steam. It is that kind of scale of development. The new trains will deliver significant improvements for passengers. In Greater Anglia’s case, the entire fleet of trains will be replaced, with over 1,000 new carriages on order. They are being built by Stadler and Bombardier, with manufacturing and construction well underway. The first five of the new Stadler trains have been delivered to Norwich Crown Point depot, where they are undergoing testing and acceptance processes.

We expect that the new trains will start to be rolled out across the network from the middle of this year, with the full roll-out completed by the end of 2020. These state-of-the-art trains will provide many more seats for busy services, which relates to points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartidge) and the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham). The new trains will be more efficient, accelerate faster and have much better customer information. They will also provide a much-improved on-board environment with wi-fi, air conditioning and power sockets, which goes back to the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree.

I want to inform the House that Greater Anglia has a franchise commitment to deliver two direct trains each weekday between Liverpool Street and Norwich in 90 minutes and two direct trains each weekday between Liverpool Street and Ipswich in 60 minutes. Those new services follow long-standing campaigns from both sides of the House, and they will commence in May. Since the start of the franchise, Greater Anglia has invested over £100 million at stations and depots and in ticketing initiatives. Major station upgrades have been completed at Norwich, Ipswich, Cambridge and Chelmsford, but I will have to take away the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford about the second railway station there. I will need to do a bit of research to provide the exact up-to-date position, but I will write to her with that information. I recognise the point about two for one and the passing loop, which has improved resilience across the entire network.

Vicky Ford: I thank the Minister so much for saying that he will do some up-to-date research. Will he also arrange to meet me to discuss the issue?

Andrew Jones: I would be delighted. We will get that in the diary rapidly.

Let me give the House a degree of context, because the Government are continuing record levels of spending. The budget for control period 6, which is the next period of rail investment funding starting in April 2019 and running through to 2024, is around £48 billion, the largest in British history. We are delivering the biggest rail modernisation programme in over a century, which means faster journeys, longer trains, longer platforms and more seats for passengers. We use giant numbers in
the rail sector, but it comes down to what we are delivering for the rail journeys that our constituents make every day.

I am aware of the renewal work as part of the upgrade, and I recognise that it is not possible to work on the railways without causing some degree of inconvenience, but it is all about improving the reliability of our network. In the past we saw a bias towards enhancements, new services and new infrastructure, rather than maintenance. That will change in control period 6, with a bias back towards maintaining the network to reduce things such as speed restrictions and to make services more reliable by unscrambling some of our rather ancient Victorian infrastructure.

The national rail passenger survey results have been mentioned, and they were published yesterday. Overall satisfaction with Greater Anglia has dropped by eight percentage points, compared with the same period last year, to 73%, and no company would want to go backwards. The most significant falls in satisfaction, compared with last year, are on: punctuality, down 10 percentage points; the helpfulness and attitude of staff, down nine percentage points; and connections with other services, down nine percentage points. That decline in satisfaction is disappointing, and it is for Greater Anglia to work closely with Network Rail to improve its performance and to deliver the service and punctuality its customers expect. I include communication improvements within that, as that has been mentioned by colleagues. I will be holding Greater Anglia to account for delivering it.

The Government set the maximum amount by which regulated fares can rise, and train operators can choose to raise their fares by a lower amount. There is no requirement for rail operators always to raise by the maximum. This year we have capped regulated fare rises in line with inflation for the sixth year running.

Mr Francois: I am grateful to the Minister for squeezing me in. He may be aware that Greater Anglia went right to the top of the cap by imposing an increase, from memory, of 3.1%, whereas c2c, which runs the line along the Thames coast, went for only 2.5%, or thereabouts. A lot of commuters on Greater Anglia, who have all the issues that I will not repeat, are particularly put out by the fact that Greater Anglia basically charged the full whack, whereas c2c, which runs one of the most efficient and effective services in the country, felt that it did not need to do so. Does it seem equitable that the people running the better, more punctual service had a lower increase and the people running the worse service went the whole way?

Andrew Jones: It is difficult to comment on that, because each individual company sets its own fares. Frankly, I want to see, as we all want to see, people retain more of their own money, which is why, from a broader Government perspective, we have had the increase in the personal allowance and the fuel duty freeze and why, from a rail industry perspective, we are in the sixth year of regulated fares. I want us to have lower fares all round, although I recognise that 98% of the money that comes in via the farebox is automatically reinvested in the network, so the farebox is a critical part of delivering the upgrades that we seek for passengers.

Mr Francois: There is a strong rumour among commuters in my constituency that Greater Anglia borrowed the money for the new trains in the City at something like 8% interest. If that is true, given current interest rates, it would be completely financially incompetent, and I can only imagine that Greater Anglia’s finance director was educated at the shadow Home Secretary’s school of mathematics. Is that true?

Andrew Jones: I do not know the commercial terms of that particular arrangement. These are private matters. The particular school to which my hon. Friend refers is, I think, mercifully not that full of students.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I think we are being good natured and ought not to be tempted to start scoring political points on what is an important matter to Members’ constituents. I am sure the Minister got the point but did not want to answer it.

Sandy Martin: Will the Minister accept that although the regulated fares have gone up by something approaching 3%, there were unregulated fares that went up by very much more than that? Can he explain why, for instance, the Anglia rover ticket went up by something approaching 30%?

Andrew Jones: I am afraid we will have to take up that individual question with the rail operating company. The position we are taking is that we impose the cap on regulated fares, where customers do not have a choice, so that they do not become the victims of insufficient market choice. That is how the system was created and that is why we have run it for six years in a row.

We have been talking about how we can take cost out. As we look into rail inflation, we recognise the need to move away from RPI towards CPI. The Secretary of State has discussed this with rail operating companies and written to the rail trade unions to ask for their understanding and co-operation. I have also discussed the issue with the rail trade unions when I have met them, although we have not yet made quite the progress that I was hoping for.

One thing highlighted has been the nature of value, not just the absolute price. The point about value is well made, because it is a question of the absolute price for the goods and services received. I hope we will be able to demonstrate significantly greater value as some of the benefits of the investment come through. We will see those benefits in more reliable journeys, greater resilience in the network and, in particular, the new rolling stock.

I appreciate that passengers across the region, including Colchester, have not always had the service that they deserve. The maintenance of a high standard of customer service performance is the absolute priority, but I recognise that when things go wrong, passengers should receive the appropriate level of compensation. The focus of our discussions with Greater Anglia are to ensure that the key criteria we have been talking about today are satisfied and delivered, and that we reach agreement to implement Delay Repay 15. My commitment to the House is that I will focus on this over the next few weeks.

With the record level funding on our network services and new rolling stock being rolled out this year by Greater Anglia, I am optimistic about anticipated improvements for constituents in Colchester and right across East Anglia.
I hope that, in a year’s time, passengers across Colchester, and right across the east of England, will see the very real benefits of the investment that matches our railway vision—

Will Quince rose—

Andrew Jones: I had just one word left to go.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I can help the Minister. He did not have to give way. Come on, Will Quince.

Will Quince: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was actually rising to thank the Minister for being so generous in taking so many interventions during this debate.

Andrew Jones: That is extremely kind of my hon. Friend. I have to say that I want to make absolutely sure—

Mr Deputy Speaker: One word.

Andrew Jones: I want to make absolutely sure that I answer colleagues’ concerns wherever I can and keep colleagues posted. Do you want to hear a bit more about rail investment in East Anglia, Mr Deputy Speaker? [Interruption] Well, that may have to wait for another time.

We have had a very good debate on the issues today. I just want to make sure that colleagues do not leave the House feeling that we are not bold in our ambitions. We have a plan to deliver the services that they want and expect for the constituents that they serve.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have just one quick question for the Minister. Did you get an apology from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)? We have missed him tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

5.55 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Divisions

Exting The European Union (Consumer Protection) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 4 December, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 309, Noes 268.

Division No. 314]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Adolati, Sim
Alijye, Adam
Alous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Rh Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, 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
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, Rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, Rh Alistair
Cairns, Rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, Rh Greg
Clarke, Rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clevery, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Courts, Robert
Cox, Rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, Rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Cerys
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
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 Sir 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
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Rh Mr Nick
Jack, Rh 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
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, Rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Rh Sir Edward
Letwin, Rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Rh Brandon
Lewis, Rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, Rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinnon, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Rh Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, Rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, Rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McCvey, Rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, Rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, Rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Rh Penny
Morgan, Rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morriss, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, Rh David
Murray, Rh Mrs Sheryll
Murison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patterson, Rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Peric, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Rh Dominic
Redwood, Rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, Rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Rh Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, Rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, Rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Deferred Divisions
30 January 2019

Soames, rh Sir Nicholas          Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Soubry, rh Anna                  Trus, rh Elizabeth
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline        Tugendhat, Tom
Spencer, Mark                    Vaiyze, rh Mr Edward
Stephenson, Andrew               Vara, rh Shailesh
Stevenson, John                  Vickers, Martin
Stewart, Bob                     Villiers, rh Theresa
Stewart, Ian                     Walker, Mr Charles
Stewart, Rory                    Walker, Mr Robin
Streeter, Sir Gary               Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Stride, rh Mel                    Warburton, David
Stuart, Graham                   Warman, Matt
Sturdy, Julian                   Watling, Giles
Sunak, Rishi                     Whately, Helen
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond           Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Swire, rh Sir Hugo                Whittaker, Craig
Sym, Sir Robert                  Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Thomas, Derek                    Wiggin, Bill
Thomson, Ross                    Williamson, rh Gavin
Throup, Maggie                   Wilson, rh Sammy
Tolhurst, Kelly                   Wood, Mike
Tomlinson, Justin                Wragg, Mr William
Tomlinson, Michael               Wright, rh Jeremy
Tracey, Craig                    Zahawi, Nadhim

NOES
Abbott, rh Ms Diane              Creasy, Stella
Amesbury, Mike                   Cruddas, Jon
Antoniazzi, Tonia                Cummins, Judith
Ashworth, Jonathan               Cunningham, Alex
Bailey, Mr Adrian                Cunningham, rh Mr Jim
Bardell, Hannah                  Daby, Janet
Barron, rh Sir Kevin             Dakin, Nic
Beckett, rh Margaret             Davey, rh Sir Edward
Benn, rh Hilary                  David, Wayne
Berger, Luciana                  Davies, Geraint
Betts, Mr Clive                  Day, Martyn
Black, Mhairi                    De Cordova, Marsha
Blackford, rh Ian                 De Piero, Gloria
Blackman, Kirsty                 Debonaire, Thangam
Brabin, Tracy                    Dent Coad, Emma
Brake, rh Tom                    Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Brock, Deidre                    Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Brown, Alan                      Dodds, Anneliese
Brown, Lyn                       Doughty, Stephen
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas            Dowd, Peter
Bryant, Chris                    Drew, Dr David
Buck, Ms Karen                   Dromey, Jack
Burgon, Richard                  Duffield, Rosie
Butler, Dawn                     Eagle, Ms Angela
Byrne, rh Liam                    Eagle, Maria
Cable, rh Sir Vince              Edwards, Jonathan
Cadbury, Ruth                    Efford, Clive
Cameron, Dr Lisa                 Elliott, Julie
Campbell, rh Sir Alan            Elman, Dame Louise
Campbell, Mr Ronnie              Elmore, Chris
Carden, Dan                      Esterson, Bill
Champion, Sarah                  Evans, Chris
Chapman, Douglas                 Farron, Tim
Charalamous, Bambos              Fellows, Marion
Cherry, Joanna                   Field, rh Frank
Ciwyd, rh Ann                    Fitzpatrick, Jim
Coaker, Vernon                   Fletcher, Colleen
Coffey, Ann                      Flint, rh Caroline
Cooper, Julie                    Fovargue, Yvonne
Cooper, Rosie                    Foxcroft, Vicky
Corbyn, rh Jeremy                Frith, James
Cowan, Ronnie                    Gaffney, Hugh
Crawsbry, Sir David              Garrow, Mike
Crawley, Angela                  Gardiner, Barry
Creagh, Mary                     George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen                 Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur                 Gilidond, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger                Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick                   Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil                       Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian                Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia                    Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew                   Hay, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian                 Hans, rh David
Harris, Carolyn                  Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue                      Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark               Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen              Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg                     Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret          Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate                    Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart                   Howarth, rh Mr George
Hug, Dr Rupa                     Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine               Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana                   Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald                    Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan               Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan                Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara                  Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal                      Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen                 Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley                    Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman                  Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris                       Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris                 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Linden, David                    Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca             Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.                    Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Madders, Justin                  Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana                 Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon                  Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael                 Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John                   McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry                  McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm        McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John               McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor                    McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz                     McKinnell, Catherine
McMorrin, Anna                   McMillan, Jim
Mears, Ian                       Meldon, Graham
Miliband, rh Edward              Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine              Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Graham                   Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa                      Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex                     O'Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie                     Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert                     Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew               Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess                    Phillips, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura                   Platt, Jo
Powell, Lucy                     Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal                   Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina                  Reeyes, Christine
Reyes, Ellie                     Reeyes, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma                   Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodd, Matt                      Rowley, Danielle
Rowan, Chris                     Ruane, Chris
Saville Roberts, Liz             Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra              Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy                  Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin                 Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis               Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth                     Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat                       Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff                      Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Question accordingly agreed to.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

That the Draft Credit Rating Agencies (Amendment, etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 December 2018, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 309, Noes 261.

Division No. 315]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bin
Afriyie, Adam
Alidou, 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, Sir 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
Braverman, Suella
Briger, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James

Twist, Liz
Urumba, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitefield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
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
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir 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
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Kate
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
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
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Macmillan, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
### Deferred Divisions

**30 JANUARY 2019**

**Deferred Divisions**

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| Knight, Julian | Kwasi }
Deferred Divisions
30 JANUARY 2019
Deferred Divisions

McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mill, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs 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
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Perkins, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, John
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
Scuilly, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew

Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, rh Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stepenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Sir 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
Tilhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, rh Sir Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffee, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowen, Ronnie
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Gwain
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frid, James
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goddiff, rh Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
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Gray, Neil
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Greenwood, Lilian
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Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
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Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, rh Mark
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Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Keven
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Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
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Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast
by Mark Tami)

Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marsten, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Deferred Divisions 30 JANUARY 2019

Question accordingly agreed to.

Radioactive Substances

That the draft Carriage of Dangerous Goods (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 20 December 2018, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 309, Noes 265.

Division No. 317]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh 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
Braverman, Suella
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookgren, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clarence, rh Andrew
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Downing, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunn, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
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Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
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Johnson, rh Boris
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Lynch, Holly (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Madders, Justin
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Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
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Thornberry, rh Emily
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Question accordingly agreed to.
House of Commons

Thursday 31 January 2019

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Nuisance Calls

1. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that company directors are held responsible for nuisance calls originating from their companies.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Government have taken firm action against nuisance calls, which cause untold stress and anxiety to older people and vulnerable groups in particular. In December last year, we introduced new rules. Directors of companies found to be in breach of those laws against nuisance calls can now be held personally liable and face fines of up to half a million pounds. That liability will extend to directors of companies that have gone into liquidation.

Bob Blackman: Like your constituents, Mr Speaker, my constituents are fed up to the back teeth of receiving scam phone calls from companies trying to get people’s savings, forcing them to get their pensions transferred and almost any other telemarketing. It is good news that the Government have taken action to set the rules so that the Information Commissioner can take action, but what are they going to do to ensure that the rules are enforced, so that company directors lose the ill-gotten gains acquired as a result of these activities?

Margot James: The Information Commissioner has powers to require companies to address unlawful practices and issue monetary penalties, including, now, against directors. Figures available for the past 12 months show that fines worth over £1.9 million have been issued to 23 companies. We have also increased substantially the resources available to the Information Commissioner’s Office, so she will be able to pursue more irresponsible and reckless companies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind the fact that nuisance calls make up some 40% of calls to elderly residents, have the Minister and the Department given consideration to putting in place a system whereby people have to opt in to allow their number to be shared?

Margot James: Opting in is a potential solution. In the past 12 months, we have extended opt-in as the means of controlling calls from pensions providers and claims management companies. I trust this will make a significant difference as they are a significant proportion of the problem.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Why is the liability limited to only half a million pounds?

Margot James: It was decided, after much deliberation, that half a million pounds was a sum of money that would be a disincentive to the majority of individuals. I accept that there may be exceptions to that, but they are relatively few and far between.

TV Licences: Over-75s

2. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will make it his policy to maintain free TV licences for people over the age of 75 after the end of the current scheme in 2020.

Margot James: Opting in is a potential solution. In the past 12 months, we have extended opt-in as the means of controlling calls from pensions providers and claims management companies. I trust this will make a significant difference as they are a significant proportion of the problem.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Why is the liability limited to only half a million pounds?

Margot James: It was decided, after much deliberation, that half a million pounds was a sum of money that would be a disincentive to the majority of individuals. I accept that there may be exceptions to that, but they are relatively few and far between.

Gavin Newlands: This obligation would cost the BBC three quarters of a billion pounds, rising to £1 billion by the end of the decade. That equates to one fifth of the BBC budget, more than its entire radio budget and equivalent to its entire spend on drama, entertainment, comedy and sport programming. Scottish sport and minority sports need more coverage, not less. Are Age UK and BECTU—the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union—not correct? This is an age-related benefit and as such it should remain the responsibility of this Government.

Jeremy Wright: Of course, as the hon. Gentleman will know, the discussions with the BBC about the transfer of this responsibility took place in 2015, at which point the BBC agreed to take on this responsibility. He will know that the licence fee income continues to increase for the BBC and he will know that this House passed legislation in 2017 to effect the transfer, so the BBC has understood throughout what the level of commitment would be and it has agreed to undertake it.
Liz McInnes: One suggestion in the consultation is that the TV licence is means-tested and linked to pension credit, yet in my constituency 1,211 over-75s do not claim the pension credits to which they are entitled so would miss out on the TV licence if it were to be linked. Does the Minister agree that that option is totally unworkable and that it is wrong of his Government to lay the burden of their own manifesto promise at the door of the BBC?

Jeremy Wright: On the hon. Lady’s last point, I have laid out how that has happened. On the consultation, as she points out the BBC has set out many options. Not all of them will find favour. I am sure that she and others will want to submit their own responses to the consultation to underline the concerns she has expressed. It is right that the BBC is consulting. It is right that it is doing so in an open way. It must consider carefully all the views it receives before deciding its next moves.

Nick Smith: Maintaining free TV licences for over-75s until 2022 was a Tory manifesto promise, but the Government had already outsourced that responsibility to the BBC. Why did they make a promise that they knew they could not keep?

Jeremy Wright: As I have set out, we expect the BBC to honour that commitment. We made it clear that we expected the BBC to take on responsibility for that concession, and it agreed to do so. That was clear to all in 2015. While the hon. Gentleman is on the subject of promises, perhaps he or one of his colleagues can explain what Labour’s view on this is. Labour Members criticise us for passing that commitment on to the BBC. Will the Labour party in government take it back? If so, how will it pay for it?

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): With the exception of God’s grace, nothing should be free. It distorts markets and misallocates resources, doesn’t it?

Jeremy Wright: As ever, I admire my right hon. Friend’s ideological purity. It is important that we make sure the BBC continues to provide an excellent service to all those who watch television. That is what it is committed to doing, and it has agreed to take over responsibility for a very specific concession. It is one of many concessions, of course; the others remain entirely unaffected.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As the Secretary of State will know, many across Torbay enjoy BBC services such as BBC Radio Devon and the BBC “Spotlight” evening news. Does he agree that very few people over 75 understand that the BBC did not take the chance to look carefully at some of its costs—particularly for very high-value entertainment and talent—rather than cut that benefit?

Jeremy Wright: I understand my hon. Friend’s point. It is of course important that the BBC continues to be accountable to the public for the money it spends, and particularly for the money it spends on talent. As he will recognise, we are able to discuss that in an informed way because the Government have brought about transparency on that point so we can see what those people are paid.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is not going to get away with devolving the blame for his cuts. More than 2 million over-75-year-olds live alone, and the Campaign to End Loneliness reports that four in 10 of them say that television is their main source of company. The last Conservative manifesto promised to keep TV licences, and the Government have committed to ending loneliness with a loneliness strategy. Will the Secretary of State pledge now that no one over 75 living alone will lose their free TV licence?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is right to focus on loneliness. He will know that the Government have produced not only a strategy but funding to follow through on the recommendations of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. That money is being spent to good effect. We want to make sure people continue to have access to all methods of support to deal with loneliness. I make the point again: it is all very well the Labour party criticising this move, but unless that is more than hot air it will have to explain whether it intends to reverse this policy. If it does not, people will suspect that it is just making further promises it has no intention of keeping.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I would like to put on the record the condolences and sympathy of everybody in this House for the family of the late Molly Russell. Her untimely death stands as a stark reminder of the dangers of online self-harm posts. I hope the Secretary of State will join me in offering the family our condolences and in doing everything we can to tackle those harmful posts.

Is it not the case that the Secretary of State’s predecessor, the previous Chancellor and the previous Secretary of State for Department for Culture, Media and Sport held the BBC to ransom over this issue, and that he has been left to clean up this mess? He should stick to his manifesto commitment to maintain pensioner benefits, including the TV licence, so elderly constituents in my Livingston constituency and across the UK can continue to enjoy it.

Jeremy Wright: First, I endorse what the hon. Lady said about the family of the late Molly Russell, and I know the whole House will offer strong condolences for her family. As the hon. Lady knows, not only is this subject of considerable interest to the Government on many fronts, but we will of course discuss it later on this morning, I am sure.

On the TV licence, let me first point out again that this Government have an exceptionally proud record on benefits for pensioners. We have made considerable provision for the increase in the state pension, a record that compares extremely favourably with that of the previous Labour Government. But in relation to this particular transition from the Government to the BBC for responsibility for this concession, I say again that the BBC understood exactly what the consequences of this change would be, and of course at the time professed, through the director-general and others, satisfaction with the charter review and funding settlement. It is a little late in the day for everyone suddenly to wake up to this issue and claim that it will have terrible consequences; the consequences have been clear.
Social Media Platforms and Hate Speech

3. Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that social media platform providers identify and remove online hate speech.

7. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that social media platform providers identify and remove online hate speech.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): In the digital charter we set out our ambition for everyone to access the opportunities of the internet and to feel safe in doing so. Our forthcoming White Paper will set out measures to ensure platforms take adequate steps to protect their users from online abuse, including hate speech, and as part of the Government’s internet safety strategy we have asked the Law Commission to conduct a review of the current law around abusive and offensive online communications.

Anna Turley: May I add my thoughts and those of my constituents and of everybody on this side of the House and across these Benches to the sympathies and condolences to the family of Molly Russell for that tragic incident?

I hear the Minister’s words and look forward to the forthcoming report, but I am afraid this just seems like too little too late. Does he not agree with the Science and Technology Committee, which has published a report today, that an existing regulator such as Ofcom could start work on a harm reduction strategy as soon as October, as I already put forward in a private Member’s Bill two years ago? This is urgent.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and am familiar with her private Member’s Bill and the report to which she refers; both are extremely valuable additions to this consideration. I am sure she will understand, however, that the most important thing we can do for the family of Molly Russell and other young people and their families who are concerned about this issue is make sure that our response is effective and properly thought through and will work in the long term. It is no good getting good headlines for a day or two and then finding that the structures we set up have holes in them that mean they cannot deliver. What that means is that the Government are taking time to get this right. It is also worth pointing out that we are the first country that will do this; if we produce a holistic approach to online harms and internet regulation, we will be the first country to do it. We should be proud of that, but we should make sure we get it right. We will do it and the hon. Lady will see the White Paper soon, but it needs to be got right.

Liz Twist: On 8 January the Petitions Committee produced its report on its inquiry into internet trolling of people with disabilities. Will the Minister commit to our recommendation to ensure that the internet is no more dangerous for disabled people than for everyone else, and will he include people with disabilities in his consultation?

Jeremy Wright: The answer to the last question is yes, and the hon. Lady is right to highlight again this report and the issues that surround the abuse that can be directed to disabled people. This is absolutely fundamental. What we must get across, not just in regulatory structures and Government action but in what we all say, is that there is no special rule that applies in the online world that means people can engage in abuse or behaviour that would be unacceptable in any other forum. That is not the case, and we all have to say it with clarity.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Nick Clegg seems to have landed on his feet since leaving this place and is now the government affairs officer or director or vice-president of Facebook, earning a million or two I understand—

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): A bit more.

Michael Fabricant: A bit more, I am told by a colleague sitting in front of me. Nick Clegg seemed startled at the idea that Facebook has any responsibility in this area when asked about it on television recently. Does my right hon. and learned Friend have any plans to speak with Mr Clegg about this—or is it Sir Nick?

Jeremy Wright: I of course would wish to say that I am sure that my hon. Friend is being unfair to our right hon. and learned Friend when asked about it on television recently. Does my right hon. and learned Friend have any plans to speak with Mr Clegg about this—or is it Sir Nick?

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State that the White Paper should provide remedies for dealing with hate speech; the real test will be whether it protects our children. Last week, we heard of the tragic case of a young girl taking her own life after being exposed to harmful material about depression and suicide online. This week, we have learned that online bullying has doubled. If I got to talk to Nick Clegg, I would tell him that, rather than focusing on protecting children, Facebook and others are focused on profiting from children. This morning, the Science and Technology Committee has called for a legal duty of care on social media companies, and we support that important report. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he supports that call, and will he state explicitly that it has to be underpinned and enforced by a regulator that has teeth?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he says about Molly Russell and others who have been affected. As he knows, she is sadly not the first of these cases and she is unlikely to be the last. I should like to take this opportunity to pay tribute also to her father, who I am sure the whole House would agree has not only dealt with his loss with immense dignity but sought to ensure that that loss was not in vain and that people will make the changes that we all agree are necessary.

On the point about a duty of care, the hon. Gentleman knows, because we have discussed it, that this is something we are considering carefully. We are also keen to ensure that whatever structures the White Paper sets up can be enforced. Although it is right to point out that some
social media companies have done some things in this space that we should applaud, it is clear that there has been nowhere near enough activity yet, and it would be wrong to assume that this House or this Government can sit back and allow the social media companies to do this voluntarily, so there will be further action, and the hon. Gentleman will see it set out in the White Paper. I look forward to his comments and the House’s reassurance on this; we will want to hear what everyone in the House and beyond has to say. As I said earlier, this is ground-breaking stuff and the UK should be proud to be able to do it first, but we must do it right. That means that the views, opinions, knowledge and expertise of many more must be included in the process.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Perhaps we can get through the remaining questions without replies that take a minute and a half. Hopeless! Sorry, but hopeless!

Tourism

4. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support tourism throughout the UK.

[908929]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Tourism is an incredibly important part—one of the most important parts—of the UK economy, generating £68 billion a year and employing more than 1.5 million people. Visit Britain and the GREAT campaign, backed by significant Government support, continue successfully to promote the UK internationally.

Mr Speaker: I thought that the hon. Gentleman was seeking to group this question with Question 5. Is that right? That is what we have been advised—[Interruption.] Surely you know your own grouping, man!

Michael Ellis: If you wish, Mr Speaker, I will certainly do that. I had not understood that to be the case, but I am happy to link that question with Question 5—[Interruption.] I will say yes.

5. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on the tourism sector deal.

[908930]

Mr Speaker: Very good. I understood that to be the request of the Government. It is quite important for the Government to know what the Government want. If the Government do not know what the Government want, how is the Speaker supposed to know, for goodness’ sake? I call Chris Davies.

Michael Ellis: I know what the Government want, Mr Speaker. So—[Interruption.] I think our colleague was going to ask a question.

Chris Davies: If the Minister does not mind, I will ask my question before he answers it!

In my beautiful constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire, the River Teme runs through the scenic Teme valley into Shropshire, the River Wye runs through the idyllic Wye valley into Herefordshire, and the well-trodden tourist trail of Offa’s Dyke—where one can walk with one foot in England in one foot in Wales—runs down my constituency border. Will my hon. Friend confirm that his Department will ensure that rural tourism is indeed cross-border?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman’s question was charming, but it was too long.

Michael Ellis: With the Brecon Beacons national park, my hon. Friend’s constituency border runs down my constituency. It is a key part of the UK economy to encourage tourism around the country, and we do that via Visit Britain and the GREAT campaign. I would happily encourage visitors to visit his constituency at any time.

Sir David Amess: With Southend-on-Sea about to become a city, please will my hon. Friend explain to the House how the tourism sector deal can help Southend-on-Sea on its journey to become not only the finest seaside resort in the country, but the finest seaside resort in the world?

Michael Ellis: The constituency certainly has one of the finest Members of Parliament. The important proposed tourism sector deal has moved into the negotiation phase, and we are exploring how the Government can work with the industry to reduce seasonality and address other tourism-related issues, such as increasing skills, improving local tourism offers and helping more people to develop tourism. All that will apply not only to my hon. Friend’s constituency, but to constituencies around the country. I wish Southend-on-Sea well.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): One of the things that drives tourism is the arts, including theatre. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Nottingham Playhouse and its new artistic director, Adam Penford, on winning regional theatre of the year in The Stage awards? Does he agree that the theatre not only demonstrates outstanding creativity, but engages with and serves our communities, works hard to make the arts accessible to everyone, and provides yet another good reason to visit Nottingham?

Michael Ellis: I absolutely agree. In fact, more people visit the theatre than go to Premiership football matches in any given year. The theatre is a key part of our economy and encourages visitors from around the world to come to this country, and I congratulate Nottingham Playhouse and its staff and management structure. I recommend that people go to the theatre and to Nottingham Playhouse.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Minister do what he can to help to promote a summer of sport in Northern Ireland and in my constituency? The Open golf tournament is coming back for the first time in 70 years, and the North West 200 motorbike race celebrates its 90th anniversary this year.

Michael Ellis: Yes, I will. The reality is that those activities and so many others in his constituency bring not only soft power, encouraging people to come to his constituency, but economic power. We encourage all sports activities in that way.
Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Tourists come to north Oxfordshire for many reasons, not least to shop in Bicester Village. Does the Minister agree that a tourism tax would not be beneficial?

Michael Ellis: I do. My hon. Friend may have seen an article by the director of the Victoria & Albert Museum. I was surprised that the director had time to engage with the subject of a tourism tax, on which I think he is wrong, but of course he is a former Labour Member and Labour MPs do like to tax as much as possible. The reality of the matter is that Bicester and other parts of this country benefit hugely from tourism, and we want to encourage it, not discouragement. There are 1.5 million jobs in tourism in this country, and Bicester attracts visitors from all over the world.

Mr Speaker: There is a lot to be said for Bicester Village. I have been there many times, and I have an extremely agreeable Zegna tie that I purchased there some years ago. I am not wearing it today, but I will wear it for the benefit of the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) on another occasion.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Tourism is greatly boosted by our music industry. Sheffield’s musicians are renowned the world over, building their reputations greatly boosted by our music industry. Sheffield’s musicians are looked after. They are an important part of our economy.

Michael Ellis: What I can guarantee is that my portfolio involves looking after the interests of musicians and orchestras. The Department does that by lobbying where appropriate and by discussing such matters with the Home Office, which is ultimately responsible for immigration issues. I met the Association of British Orchestras only last week. We are ensuring that musicians are looked after. They are an important part of our economy.

International Sport

8. Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage more international sport to be played in the UK. [908933]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): My Department works closely with UK Sport and national sports governing bodies, as well as with local, regional and devolved partners, to ensure that the UK successfully bids for and stages a range of the world’s largest sporting events. We have secured over 100 major international sports events since 2012, and this will be an exciting summer; which will include the cricket world cup, the cycling road world championships and the netball world cup. Of course, we are looking forward to UEFA 2020, and not far off is the rugby league world cup in 2021.

Mr Speaker: And Wimbledon.

Andrew Rosindell: Now that the FIFA bidding process is much more transparent, has the Minister considered the possibility of holding the 2030 World cup in England or in the United Kingdom, involving all the home nations of our nation?

Mims Davies: As the Prime Minister said last year, the UK Government would support a bid to host the 2030 FIFA World Cup. I welcome that transparency and the football associations are free to decide whether to pursue that opportunity. The English FA is already working with the FAs of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Ireland to explore the feasibility of such a joint bid.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I am sure the Minister will join me in welcoming the fact that the 2021 rugby league world cup opening ceremony will take place at Newcastle’s St James’ Park. Does she agree that all sport played at St James’ Park should be played in the interest of the fans, not of finance, and that the Premier League would do well to learn that?

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady, adorned in black and white, makes her point once again. It is a very exciting announcement for the cities involved, and it is right that she continues to stand up for her football club and for the great sporting prowess in her constituency. It is right that we send the message that Newcastle should continue to play its part.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the excellent Minister agree it is important to have international sport here regularly? Four American football games a year are now played in this country—two at Wembley and two at the excellent Tottenham Hotspur ground next year—but would it not be better if we had a permanent franchise so that we could have American football played here throughout the season?

Mims Davies: The Americans are coming—on a trade level, on a footballing level and on a baseball level. We will see Major League Baseball at the London stadium, as well as more National Football League games. The Houston Texans and the Carolina Panthers are coming, and we will be seeing more and more coming across from the stateside. I am sure my hon. Friend will be delighted to attend. Perhaps we could go together.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): There are concerning reports this week that Six Nations rugby, one of the great annual sporting events that unites the nation, is about to be subsumed in a world tournament and disappear off to subscription TV. Will the Minister take steps to add Six Nations rugby to the listed events that must be offered live to free-to-air TV?

Mims Davies: As the Six Nations approaches, the excitement fast builds. Such concerns have already been raised with me this week by the Secretary of State for Wales, and I have agreed to meet him and broadcasters. It is important that this area of sport, which we all enjoy, is available for everyone to see and to be part of. I will be taking those concerns forward.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con) rose—
Mr Speaker: We have heard from a Tottenham fan, so we have to hear from an Arsenal fan.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): On Saturday I enjoyed watching England’s under-18 schoolboys beat Australia at the excellent Stafford Town football club. Can we ensure that international matches in all sports are played right across the country, including in our great towns as well as in our cities?

Mims Davies: That sounds like another bid. It is right that we should host international sporting opportunities across our great country. Perhaps my hon. Friend is looking beyond London, and it is right that Stafford plays its part.

Broadband and Mobile Phone Coverage: Rural Areas

9. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve broadband and mobile phone coverage in rural areas.

11. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve broadband and mobile phone coverage in rural areas.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Government have invested £1.8 billion of public money to ensure that more than 95% of premises in the UK have access to superfast broadband. UK broadband operates voucher schemes, and we are introducing a universal service obligation that will give everyone the right to a minimum speed of 10 megabits per second. These interventions are designed especially to help people in rural areas.

Antoinette Sandbach: A number of Eddisbury residents have been denied superfast broadband because Openreach refused to connect them to their nearest cabinet as, for historical reasons, they are connected to one many miles away. What can the Minister do to ensure that common sense applies?

Margot James: I understand the frustration of Eddisbury residents. Wherever possible, Openreach network planners seek to ensure that customers are connected to the nearest cabinet, but this is not always possible. Businesses and communities may apply for a voucher through one of our schemes to contribute towards the cost of reconnecting to a closer cabinet. I would be happy to facilitate a meeting between my hon. Friend and officials in my Department to establish the best way forward for Eddisbury residents.

Tom Pursglove: With more and more business being carried out online, superfast broadband connections are vital. What progress has been made on rolling out full fibre where there is a strong case for public investment? What progress has been made on rural areas?

Margot James: The Government are investing £67 million in the gigabit broadband voucher scheme, which provides small and medium-sized enterprises with vouchers worth up to £2,500. We are focusing on rolling out full fibre where there is a strong case for public investment. Our strategy is to prioritise rural areas.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the Minister answer the second part of the question tabled by the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), which was about mobile phone signals? What are the Government doing about that? Large swathes of my constituency in south Wales still do not have basic mobile phone access—some of them do not have 3G access, never mind 4G. The Government really must start resolving mobile phone signal issues.

Margot James: I can answer the hon. Gentleman’s question by referring to the new spectrum auction, which is taking place this year, on which Ofcom is consulting. Ofcom’s duty is to manage the use of spectrum efficiently, and we expect it to deliver on our manifesto commitment to provide 95% of the country, geographically, with signal.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister have a word with the planning Minister to make sure that when there is a new development in a rural area, it does not cause the existing IT capability to deteriorate?

Margot James: Our Department’s priority is to make sure that new-build properties and developments are all built with full fibre, wherever possible. If I have not answered the rest of the hon. Gentleman’s question with regard to the impact on the rest of the technology, I would be happy to write to him.

Artificial Intelligence

10. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that the UK remains a world leader in the field of artificial intelligence.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The UK is a world leader in AI. Our AI and data grand challenge, as part of the industrial strategy, is a major collaboration, with up to £950 million of industry and government funding driving measures for innovation, and attracting and retaining global talent to maintain our position as a global leader in AI.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have overrun, because I am keen to accommodate colleagues, but I know that the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) will confine himself to a pithy sentence.

Eddie Hughes: Thank you, Mr Speaker. What assurance can the Minister give me that work to develop AI is being co-ordinated across not just government, but the whole public sector?

Margot James: We have established an Office for Artificial Intelligence across the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Its job is to encourage strong dialogue between Departments and the wider
public sector, including academia. For example, The Alan Turing Institute’s specialist public sector AI unit is involved in this process.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Staffordshire University has one of the best AI robotics courses in the country. What role does the Minister see the universities that are training the AI robotics engineers of the future playing in ensuring that the AI technology of today is working?

Margot James: I congratulate the university in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency on its great work. The Government have invested £50 million in AI fellowships and £100 million in 1,000 new PhD places, of which I hope his local institution will be able to take advantage.

Music Education

12. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the provision of music education in schools. [908941]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Giving young people opportunities to participate in art, drama and music at school can be transformative for their self-confidence, mental health and life chances, which is why the Government are investing £500 million in cultural education between 2016 and 2020.

Christian Matheson: Fifty per cent. of children in independent schools receive sustained music tuition, but the proportion is only 15% in state schools. Does the Minister agree with UK Music that there is a growing crisis in music education in the state sector that will pose a threat to the talent pipeline?

Michael Ellis: It is important to have music in schools—I absolutely recognise that—and I am working closely with colleagues at the Department for Education. I have meetings with the Minister for School Standards and maths. W e now want to focus on arts subjects, including music, as well.

Mr Speaker: Finally in this section, Mrs Marion Fellows.

TV Broadcasts: Audio Description

14. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What steps he is taking to increase the provision of audio description in television broadcasts for visually impaired people. [908943]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): Ofcom’s code on television access services sets out broadcast requirements on accessibility for the visual or hearing impaired. Since the code’s introduction, 84 UK channels have been required to provide access services. In December 2017, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport asked Ofcom to provide recommendations on making on-demand services more accessible. This Ofcom has done, and we are considering our response.

Marion Fellows: Despite there being more than 2 million people with visual impairment and approximately 400,000 registered blind people in the UK, broadcasters are mandated to supply audio description for only 10% of programmes. Does the Minister agree that TV broadcasts should be enjoyed by everyone? Will she review legislation to end this discrimination?

Margot James: I am aware of the 10% statistic that the hon. Lady cites. The situation is kept under review, as are the requirements for on-demand providers, which could do a lot better than they are doing in respect of access for visually and hearing disabled people.

Topical Questions

T1. [908945] Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The House will have noted this week that digital, culture, media and sport sectors are growing more than twice as fast as the UK’s non-financial business economy as a whole. That is testament to the hard work and global appeal of our creators and innovators. I congratulate all DCMS sectors on this success.

Talking of success, Mr Speaker—you will want me to get this bit in—I am sure that the House will join me, as I know you will, in paying tribute to Andy Murray after he announced earlier this month that he is likely to retire this year. He has been an inspiration both on and off the court, and I know that the whole House will want to wish him well for the future.

Mr Speaker: Well, that was extremely welcome!

Stephanie Peacock: As was recently brought up in my digital surgery in Barnsley, the copyright directive is at a crucial stage, while YouTube continues to rip off musicians. Will the Secretary of State confirm the Government’s full support for the directive?

Jeremy Wright: We do indeed support the directive. We think it is very important that those who create content from which the platforms benefit hugely are properly rewarded for their efforts. We want to make sure that the system is workable, and that is exactly what we are attempting to achieve.

T4. [908949] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As a member of the Science and Technology Committee, I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend welcome the publication of our report on social media. Hopefully it will help him in his thinking
when he comes to develop the internet safety strategy. May I push him a little further on what the timing for that strategy might be?

Jeremy Wright: We have made it clear that our White Paper will be published in the winter, and those paying close attention to the weather forecast will have noticed that the winter is not over yet.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Football supporters are repeatedly made worse off when fixtures are rescheduled. Fans’ representatives from every single premier league club agree that it is time for action. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), cancelled his meeting with me this week. The football family needs a Government who are on our side, so can the Minister make it clear what the Government’s position is on a fans fair travel scheme?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I have met my hon. Friend on exactly this issue, and can say that he is making strides on it. He is very concerned that our fans are being caught in the middle of this and is working with us to do something about it. If the hon. Lady knows of particular fixtures that are affected by strike action or by broadcasting issues that she would like me to raise again, I am happy to meet her and take this forward.

Mr Speaker: I call Huw Merriman.

T5. [908947] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Apologies, Mr Speaker, I was half asleep. [ Interruption. ] I am now fully awake.

East Sussex bid to the Cultural Development Fund, which would have created an enterprise zone for our amazing art galleries on the coast, was sadly rejected. Will there be an opportunity to apply again and, if successful, will the Secretary of State join me for a cup of tea down at Bexhill-on-Sea?

Jeremy Wright: I am happy to have the cup of tea so long as my hon. Friend stays awake. On the Cultural Development Fund, I am sorry that his constituency was not successful, but he will know that there were five successful bidders, who, we think, will be able to deliver huge advantage to their own areas. I hope that that success will demonstrate a good case for pursuing this objective, and, as and when we do, we will make sure that he and his area have the chance to bid again.

T2. [908948] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State update us on the Government’s consultation on the 9 pm watershed on junk food advertising on TV and on similar restrictions online?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, the hon. Lady makes an important point that this is about broadcast media and about what we can do online. We will bring the consultation forward, as we promised to do, very soon. She will recognise that considerable progress in the area to which she refers has already been made, including, of course, with the soft drinks levy, which has effectively removed 45 million kg of sugar from the diets of children in particular.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I wonder whether the Minister is aware that non-league football is in a really difficult financial position. I know that myself, as I am president of Hemel Hempstead Town Football Club. Is the Minister aware of any future money coming down the line from the premiership, which seems to be flush with money? Money is literally flowing in the transfer market. Teams galore have money flying everywhere, especially Arsenal, but it needs to flow down to non-league football.

Mims Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that concern. The grassroots is benefiting from £100 million a year in Premier League investment, and we are already in discussions with the body about ensuring that it remains at least at that level for the next three years. However, I absolutely agree that the time is right to keep looking forward to what can be done to enhance the pipeline of youngsters coming through, and to ensure that there is equal opportunity in participation so that, wherever a person comes from, they can get involved in sport.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): The hon. Lady is quite right: it was a very good debate in Westminster Hall. The debate showed the level of artistic and cultural activities going on in our towns. Will the Minister say what action has been taken as a result of that debate?

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Money Laundering

1. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in prosecuting money laundering. [908947]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The Crown Prosecution Service plays a central role in combating money laundering, terrorist financing and the pursuit of asset recovery within our criminal justice system. Dealing with illicit finance through the prosecution of money laundering offences remains a critical priority for our prosecuting agencies. Just last year, more than 1,400 convictions were sustained where it was the principal or an associated offence charged in the Crown Court.

Michael Fabricant: It seems that the Government need to get an even firmer grip on the Serious Fraud Office and the Crown Prosecution Service. Does my right hon. and learned Friend have any plans to strengthen oversight in that way?
The Attorney General: My hon. Friend must remember that the financial action taskforce in December carried out an evaluation of system responses to money laundering. Of the 60 countries assessed, the United Kingdom emerged first for having the most effective system in the world for combating money laundering. Set against that background, we can make improvements and I hope to make them through the governance changes that I am introducing. We are instituting a ministerial board, which I shall chair. We shall have a much stronger grip on information coming from the Crown Prosecution Service, and we hope to anticipate problems before they arise.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Attorney General further outline how much money seized from criminal assets in the assets recovery scheme has been reinvested into community funds in the past year?

The Attorney General: Last year, £80.1 million was recovered by the Crown Prosecution Service, but I am afraid that I am not in a position to help the hon. Gentleman with regards to the community funds. I can undertake to write to him with those details, and I hope that he will be satisfied with that.

Soldiers and Veterans: Protection from Prosecution

2. Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to protect soldiers and veterans from prosecution.

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The Government are unstinting in their admiration and gratitude for the work of the armed forces. We expect the highest standards of our service personnel, and the overwhelming majority meet those expectations, serving with great honour and distinction. The Government are taking very seriously the concerns that have been expressed by this House about investigations and prosecutions of veterans in historical operations. The Secretary of State for Defence, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I are looking carefully at the measures available to us, and we shall be making announcements during the course of this year.

Leo Docherty: Does the Attorney General agree that we need urgently to derogate from the European convention on human rights? Apart from anything else, it is the right thing to do. It is also on page 41 of the Conservative party manifesto, and there is clearly overwhelming public support for protecting our soldiers and veterans from legal pursuit.

The Attorney General: I can confirm that we shall give consideration to a derogation from the convention before future military operations commence. That will necessarily depend on the nature of the operation, and the circumstances and facts of the activities that we are contemplating, but it will now be a consideration that will be taken into account before any military operation.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The writ of the Attorney General runs large, but it does not extend to Northern Ireland in criminal matters, where he features as the Advocate General. Will he give a commitment today that any scheme that is brought forward to protect our service personnel extends to them, wherever they should live in this United Kingdom?

The Attorney General: I can give the hon. Gentleman that confirmation. No area of the United Kingdom can be left out; plainly that would be wrong. As he knows, that does not mean that there may not be particular considerations peculiar to Northern Ireland that have to be taken into account, and I am in discussions with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about those considerations.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Is the Attorney General aware that servicemen of my age who served in Northern Ireland through the ’70s will be petrified about the fact that there is a letter about future prosecutions coming down the line, even though they were investigated decades ago? We need to move forwards so that this House decides whether our veterans are protected in the same way as it seems this House protects terrorists that were out there then.

The Attorney General: As my right hon. Friend knows, I have the greatest respect for all those who have served in our armed forces. My own family were an armed forces family, and I am acutely anxious to resolve this question to the satisfaction of this House. The measures that we have in mind would not be peculiar to one area of the United Kingdom, would be comprehensive and, I hope, would give dignity, peace of mind and assurance to all those who have served in our armed forces. We are anxious to make announcements as soon as possible.

Domestic Abuse: Prosecution Rates

3. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the CPS on improving prosecution rates for domestic abuse.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Dealing with domestic abuse is a top priority for the Government, and I regularly engage with the CPS on this subject. The CPS wants to ensure that every victim of domestic abuse has full confidence in the justice system. Only last month it unveiled a best practice model developed in partnership with the police and the Courts Service to help victims through the criminal justice process.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Minister for that answer. What success has the Crown Prosecution Service had in prosecuting controlling and coercive behaviour as a feature of domestic abuse?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Since we introduced the law on coercive control several years ago the number of charges continues to increase. In 2016-17, 309 charges were brought, but last year that trebled to 960.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): One of the main barriers to victims of domestic abuse and rape coming forward is the fear of having to hand their entire lives and personal information over to the defence. What steps is the CPS taking to ensure that victims are reassured that disclosure is appropriate and proportionate, and that victims are not asked to sign away their privacy?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. Several months ago, the Attorney General and I issued a new paper on disclosure, and that will be followed by revised guidelines this year. We
are acutely conscious of the need to balance the interests of justice not just in favour of defendants but in favour of victims. A blanket approach to disclosure is not something we encourage; it will depend on the facts of the case. I am glad that the number of cases that are being dropped because of issues with victims continues to fall, and I think that is a sign of progress.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The latest figures published by the Home Office show that only 1.9% of recorded rapes are prosecuted. Baroness Newlove, the Victims’ Commissioner, said:

“I am often hearing from victims of sexual crime that their criminal justice journey is as harrowing as the crime itself. This is just not acceptable. I fear we are letting these victims down badly.”

She is right, isn’t she?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman will be interested to know that only last week I met Baroness Newlove and discussed these very issues. It is vitally important that colleagues in the Ministry of Justice and across Government understand that the journey for victims in cases like this can be an extremely tough one. That is well understood. That is why the agencies are now working together to ease that journey. I do not pretend that the task is easy or that the job is anywhere near finished, but the commitment is there, and we will continue to work to support victims of rape.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I do not dispute the Solicitor General’s worthy intentions in this, but we have a situation where two in 100 reported rapes are reaching prosecution. It is a quite appalling statistic. First, he must acknowledge the impact that spending cuts have had on the ability to investigate these offences. Secondly, he should acknowledge that piecemeal change is no longer enough— the time has come for drastic action.

The Solicitor General: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, he must not forget that independent prosecutors have to apply evidential tests and it will not always be the case that complaints will merit a prosecution. I wholly reject his suggestion that expenditure cuts have resulted in a decrease in prosecutions. Expenditure is not an issue when it comes to the prosecution of offences, and never will be.

Knife Crime: Prosecution

4. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the CPS on improving prosecution rates for knife crime. [908917]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I engage regularly with the CPS, and we recognise that this issue is a growing national priority. Prosecution rates have been rising year on year for knife crime. Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, there has been a 33% increase. The Offensive Weapons Bill now making its way through this House will tighten the law around the sale, delivery and possession of knives.

Bob Blackman: I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend on not only talking to the CPS about changing the sentences on knife crime but actually taking action and going to the Court of Appeal to make sure that an unduly lenient sentence has been lengthened to three and a half years’ imprisonment, quite rightly. What action can he take to make sure that the courts understand their duty to imprison people who are guilty of knife crime?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend raises a serious London case, and as a London MP, he is a passionate campaigner against knife crime. I warmly welcome the decision of the Court of Appeal yesterday to increase the sentence in that case. Lord Justice Leveson, the president of the Queen’s bench division, was clear in his approach, stating:

“There can never be any excuse for carrying a weapon of the type this offender carried” and that the courts must impose “substantial and effective” sentences on those convicted.

Internet Trolling: Prosecution Rates

5. Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): What steps the CPS is taking to improve prosecution rates for offences related to internet trolling. [908918]

12. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps the CPS is taking to improve prosecution rates for offences related to internet trolling. [908925]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I recognise that internet trolling can have devastating effects on victims, and where an offence has been committed, the CPS response will be robust. The number of prosecutions commenced for offences under the Communications Act 2003 and the Malicious Communications Act 1988 has increased by over 20% in the last three years, and last year the CPS published revised guidelines on prosecuting cases involving communications sent via social media.

Danielle Rowley: We all know in this job how harrowing and tough trolling and online abuse can be. When I visit schools in my constituency, young people tell me that they not only experience a lot of online abuse but see it happening to people in jobs that they might aspire to and worry about the level of abuse they might face if they went into such jobs. What is being done to ensure that online abuse is given the serious treatment that other types of abuse is given, so that people can see that it will not be taken lightly?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady is right to point to the concern about the younger generation being disincentivised from coming forward, particularly into public service. That should worry us all as parliamentarians and legislators. I can reassure her that the CPS has worked hard to develop new guidance for prosecutors, which makes it clear that online abuse is just as bad as offline abuse; there is no distinction in law. Where communications amount to credible threats of violence, prosecutions will commence. I know that Members are concerned about the balance between freedom of expression and prosecutions, and I assure the hon. Lady that that matter is very much in my mind as we develop further guidelines to assist not only parliamentarians but everybody in public life.
Liz Twist: On 8 January, the Petitions Committee produced its report, “Online abuse and the experience of disabled people”. Will the Solicitor General look at that report and ensure that every step is taken to prosecute cases of online abuse against disabled people?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady may know that I have a particular passion about combating disability hate crime. I have met disability organisations in her region—the wonderful north-east—and learned a lot from them about the importance of ensuring that they have the confidence to report crime. I have read the Petitions Committee report. It is excellent, and I am noting in particular the actions that the CPS needs to take.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does the Solicitor General agree that, while robust action is needed through the courts and the CPS, there is also an enormous responsibility for those who hold public office and offices that command responsibility to call this sort of behaviour out?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right. There can be no moral relativism when it comes to abuse, whatever type it may be and from whatever quarter it comes.

Hunting Act: Prosecution Rates


The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Each CPS area has a Crown prosecutor dedicated to act as a wildlife, rural and heritage crime co-ordinator, to ensure that the specialist knowledge needed to prosecute such offending is readily available. Co-ordinators work closely with specialist officers from local police forces and from the National Wildlife Crime Unit, to ensure a robust CPS response.

Justin Madders: I am disappointed that I did not hear from the Attorney General, because I wanted to hear about his recent field visit to a hunt, where I am sure the law was perfectly observed. The Solicitor General will be aware that there have been many reports up and down the country over the Christmas period of transgressions of the law. The public expect the law to be enforced in full. Is it not time we strengthened the Hunting Act?

The Solicitor General: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Law Officers do not condone or in any way consent to lawbreaking—that is clear. Where there is evidence of a breach of the Hunting Act and unlawfulness, that evidence will be used to prosecute.

Leaving the EU: Priorities

7. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the priorities for his Office.

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): In relation to the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union, my priority is to support the delivery of the Government’s objectives. That includes giving legal and constitutional advice within the Government on our international negotiations and treaty obligations, the programme of domestic legislation to implement the consequences of exit, and of course supporting preparations for future international co-operation between the law officers departments and with prosecution and other criminal justice officers.

Patrick Grady: I suppose we should congratulate the Attorney General on his appointment to the glorious new negotiating troika that is going to solve in the next two weeks all the problems that the Government have not been able to in the past two years. During that time, how open will he be with the House about the legal advice that he is providing so that we can make informed decisions about the new deal that is going to be negotiated—or will we have to keep dragging him kicking and screaming to the House through Humble Addresses and other procedures to get that information out of him?

The Attorney General: I have already said to the House that in future, on matters of law that are particularly relevant to the House’s consideration, I and the Government will consider releasing advice that has been given on these questions. I will not give any guarantee in advance, but let me make it plain that I shall listen carefully to the House and, in so far as it is needed, I will endeavour to satisfy Members.

Peter Grant: One of the matters that the Attorney General decided was a priority was to launch a case in the Supreme Court challenging the legal competence of the Scottish Parliament, which has just passed the Continuity Bill. Not only did the Government delay that by taking that action but they then mounted a retrospective power grab through the unelected House of Lords to remove from the elected Parliament of Scotland the power to pass legislation that it had already passed. What was the cost to the taxpayers of the United Kingdom of that Supreme Court case?

The Attorney General: The Government won that case, as the hon. Gentleman quite knows. The truth is that it has gone back to the Scottish Parliament, and the system is working. It is the purpose of the referral system to delineate and demarcate the proper boundaries between the devolved Governments and Westminster. That is what the Supreme Court decided. As to the cost, I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman if he would like me to do so.

Drew Hendry: In December a ferry contract was awarded to Seaborne Freight without competitive tender, due to extreme urgency, but the Government have known...
for years about the possibility of no deal. Will he release the legal advice that permitted the Department for Transport to proceed under regulation 32?

The Attorney General: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, that is not a subject within my ministerial responsibility. The legal advice inside any Department is a matter for that Department; it does not come automatically to the Attorney General. There is an important principle of confidentiality and privilege associated with legal advice, which I hope the House will not lose. The matter that he has raised is not a matter for me; it is a matter for the Secretary of State.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the most pressing practical priority for the prosecuting authorities is to secure continued access to the critical database systems available under the Eurojust criminal co-operation arrangements, and that that requires as an absolute priority achieving a deal to ensure continued data regulation alignment so that there can be lawful access to those databases?

The Attorney General: As my hon. Friend well knows, the Government are keen to establish with the European Union the closest possible security partnership for precisely the reasons that he gives.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Can the Attorney General give a reassurance that EU citizens who live in this country on 29 March will have their rights protected, whether we have a deal or a no-deal?

The Attorney General: Yes.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): If we find ourselves in the backstop, the withdrawal agreement allows the EU to make the decision whether our trade arrangements avoid a hard border in Northern Ireland. Would a simple, workable solution for both sides be to allow an independent body to make that decision?

The Attorney General: Article 20 of the proposed Northern Ireland protocol allows already for either party to discuss and agree with the other that the backstop is no longer necessary, and that is arbitrable under the dispute resolution mechanism of the withdrawal agreement. I do not necessarily accept the characterisation that there is a veto. The European Union under the proposals would be bound by the duty of good faith and best endeavours, and it could not just decline to consider a reasonable measure put forward by the United Kingdom.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): May I return the Attorney General’s attention to the question of Seaborn Freight? He, like me, will be well aware that if the Department for Transport has avoided competitive tendering under regulation 32 without a proper basis in law, it could face legal action. Has he been asked to advise on the matter, and how much money has been set aside for the contingency of court action concerning the potential illegality of the procurement process and any claim for damages?

The Attorney General: The hon. and learned Lady, who is a lady of great distinction in the legal profession, knows quite well that I am bound by the Law Officers’ Convention. I realise why she is trying to tempt me to give fuller answers, but I cannot disclose either the fact or the substance of any advice that I may have given. As for her substantive question, I suggest that she address it to the Secretary of State.

Oversight of Solicitors

10. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Whether he has had discussions with the Secretary of State for Justice on reforms to the oversight of solicitors.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I have had regular meetings with the Secretary of State for Justice, in which we have discussed a range of policy matters including regulation of the legal professions. Legal services in England and Wales are independently regulated in accordance with the framework set out in the Legal Services Act 2007. Solicitors are regulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority, which prosecutes solicitors and firms where necessary.

Sir Desmond Swayne: If the SRA cannot and will not compensate the EcoHouse investors, it is ripe for reform, is it not?

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend tempts me down a path leading to the SRA’s discretion with regard to compensation. I am grateful to him for raising an important issue that concerns many colleagues in the House. I think it best that we take these matters up not just with the Ministry of Justice, but with the SRA itself.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I urge the Solicitor General to do more about solicitors up and down the country who are carrying on their business in a very strange and devious way? I have been talking to representatives of the insurance industry, and I understand that clusters of solicitors are making false claims relating to holiday insurance and whiplash. We know where those dodgy solicitors are, but the current regulation does not seem to be working. What is the Solicitor General going to do about it?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. The Legal Services Board has currently drafted proposed new rules relating to the governance for regulators; the consultation closed last week, and new statutory guidance will be issued. However, I take the hon. Gentleman’s point. Corrupt solicitors not only damage the reputation of the profession but raise insurance premiums, driving smaller firms out of business. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and his point is fully understood here.
Business of the House

10.43 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will be as follows:

Monday 4 February—Motions relating to the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2019 and the draft Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order 2019, followed by a general debate on sport in the United Kingdom.

Tuesday 5 February—Motions relating to the police grant and local government finance reports.

Wednesday 6 February—A motion relating to the appointment of the Comptroller and Auditor General, followed by motions relating to the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2019 and the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers’ Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2019.

Thursday 7 February—A general debate on antisocial behaviour, followed by a general debate on beer taxation and pubs. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 8 February—Private Members’ Bills.

The House has much to celebrate this week. Yesterday, the House agreed to additional days for private Members’ Bills to give more excellent Back-Bench proposals the chance to reach the statute book, and I am truly delighted that on Monday the House agreed to introduce proxy voting. The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) exercised the first proxy vote on Tuesday—a memorable day to do so. Today is Young Carers Awareness Day. On behalf of the House, I thank all those amazing young people whose love and care save lives. We owe them our gratitude and a commitment to do all we can to support them.

The House will know that recess dates are always announced subject to the progress of business. In this unique Session of Parliament, and in the light of the significant decisions taken by the House this week, it is only right that I give the House notice that there are currently no plans to bring forward a motion to agree dates for the February recess and that the House may therefore need to continue to sit to make progress on the key business before it.

I realise that this is short notice for colleagues and House staff, but I think our constituents would expect the House to continue to make progress at this important time. I will endeavour to provide confirmation of the sitting arrangements and business for February as soon as possible. I am very sorry for the inconvenience this will cause to colleagues, House staff and their families. Where House staff are concerned, conversations are under way to ensure that disruption is limited and that no one is out of pocket, and where Members have family, ministerial or constituency commitments, the usual channels will work hard with them to limit the inconvenience.

Valerie Vaz: I do not know whether to thank the Leader of the House for this last-minute change of plan. There is a way of doing this, particularly through the usual channels. Is this the business—staggering from one week to the next? I cannot possibly imagine what hon. Members are going through with this announcement. The shadow Secretary of State for Education has asked me to raise this—she heard on the media that it is possible that the recess may be cancelled. What provision will be given to hon. Members for their children? It cannot be right that hon. Members have to support their children in that way without the Government stepping in and providing proper provision for it.

The House has a lot of business to get through before exit day on 29 March. Other than the withdrawal agreement, six other essential Bills need to be got through: the Trade Bill, the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill, the Agriculture Bill, the Fisheries Bill and the Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill. Will the Leader of the House confirm that there will be substantial debates during those two weeks rather than general debates, which we are seeing next week?

I want to thank the Government for one thing: for working constructively through the usual channels to ensure that the REACH regulations, which I raised last week, will be debated on the Floor of the House. Could the Leader of the House do this again through the usual channels? We prayed against the Securitisation Regulations 2018. Securitisation is really important. It is the pooling of different kinds of loans and debts wrapped up in a financial package. I am sure the Leader of the House knows how important it is, because it was widely regarded as one of the reasons for the financial crash. Not only does that piece of secondary legislation amend primary legislation—which is anathema to constitutional lawyers—but it affects criminal offences already on the statute book and transfers significant powers to the Financial Conduct Authority. The statutory instrument does not quite make it clear whether the FCA will get additional responsibilities, what they will be and whether it will get additional resources for supervision or compliance.

The Leader of the House said in business questions on 17 January that she remained confident that all statutory instruments that needed to be brought forward would be in time for exit day. She will know that 600 SIs are still to be tabled. Last week, 21 were laid, which was seven short of the Government’s average weekly target. On a scale of one to 10, how confident is she that the SIs will be properly debated by 29 March, given that multiple SIs are sometimes wrapped up in one package?

We have had two years of “road to Brexit” speeches. We stagger from vote to vote, from week to week. Today, we heard the Foreign Secretary make an announcement on the radio that Brexit may have to be delayed. Is that the way to run a Government—informing people outside the House before you have been informed, Mr Speaker, or before the House has been informed?

The Prime Minister said she wants no running commentary, yet now she wants to meet everyone. I am pleased to say that she met the Leader of the Opposition and the Opposition Chief Whip yesterday. First, we are told that it is the only deal in town, and now there is a renegotiation. The Government voted for their deal, and on Tuesday they voted against it. The Prime Minister has said that “nothing has changed.” She is right, because the EU has said that nothing will change. Yet the Government are looking for “alternative arrangements”,...
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Sneaked out?

Valerie Vaz: Yes, it was—in a written statement.

[Interruption.] The Secretary of State should have announced it in the House. The shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has called it a “shoddy deal”. Councils need significantly more than a 2.8% rise, and the Local Government Association has said that councils still face a funding gap of more than £3 billion a year. We have had no information on business rates retention, on new funding for social care or on the Green Paper on adult social care. Will the Leader say when that will be published?

We need a debate on why councils are investing in commercial property. Tesco Extra has been bought for £38.8 million by East Hampshire District Council. Branches of Waitrose and Travelodge have been acquired by Runnymede Borough Council for £21.7 million. Ian Hayes from Runnymede has told me that Runnymede Borough Council had to request an increase in the council’s authorised borrowing limit to facilitate earlier purchase of property acquisitions. [Interruption.] As the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who interrupts me from a sedentary position, will know, a B&Q store is now owned by Dover District Council. These are purchases of commercial property outside the local authorities.

I agreed with the Leader of the House when she said that it was an interesting and very important day on the local authorities. These are purchases of commercial property outside a B&Q store is now owned by Dover District Council. who interrupts me from a sedentary position, will know, next week on the local government settlement. That was NHS 10-year-plan?

The Leader of the House has announced a debate next week on the local government settlement. That was negotiations on business rates retention, on new funding for social care or on the Green Paper on adult social care. Will the Leader say when that will be published?

The hon. Lady asked whether we have time for all our Brexit legislation by exit day. I can absolutely assure her that my day job is to make sure, on a daily basis, that both the primary legislation and the secondary legislation are progressing through the House. That is the case and will continue to be the case. I am confident that the legislation we need to have Royal Assent—or, in the case of secondary legislation, to be made—by the 29 March will be done. On secondary legislation for Brexit, over 360 EU exit SIs have been laid to date. We are making good progress. We are under pressure, but it is all very much under control and we do expect to achieve what we need to do by 29 March.

The hon. Lady asks about statutory instruments the Opposition have prayed against. As I say consistently to the hon. Lady, the Government have a good record of providing time to debate negative SIs that are prayed against by the official Opposition when a reasonable request is made. The official Opposition prayed against six Treasury SIs very late in the praying period—in fact, the last day before they were made—and did not request a debate through the usual channels. I am afraid that is quite late in the day to be making such requests, but I will continue to consider requests that are made through the usual channels.

I am pleased that the hon. Lady is pleased that the universal credit regulations that are subject to the affirmative procedure will be debated in both Houses. She asks for a debate on the NHS 10-year plan. That is a very good ideaage and I will certainly take that away as a representation from her. She asks about the local government funding SI to be debated next week. She asks for a debate, which I have just announced will be next week, so I hope she is pleased that there will be a debate. She suggests that a written ministerial statement is “sneaking out” news. As far as this Parliament has always been concerned, a written ministerial statement is not sneaking out news; it is providing information to the House in a way that is entirely orderly.

The hon. Lady mentions the appalling situation for Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. The hon. Lady will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made it a personal mission to seek to free Nazanin, so that she can get back to her husband and daughter. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady says when. I am not sure what she thinks the UK Government should do, other than to continue to make representations, as we are doing, on the grounds of human rights and the innocence of Nazanin, to have her returned home to her family as soon as possible.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the future of the national lottery? It was set up with the best of intentions, but it has been completely ruined by a multiplicity of games, all at the expense of small lotteries, which give so much valuable support to many charities.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. He will be aware that the national lottery has raised over £39 billion for good causes since 1994. The Government are committed to ensuring both society lotteries and the national lottery continue to thrive. There was a consultation, between June and September 2018, on the proposed reform of society lotteries to try to allow society lotteries to grow by changing sales and
prize limits, while protecting the position of the national lottery. The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has said that he will respond to the consultation in the first half of this year.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

Well, who would have thought it? They actually all united, Mr Speaker. They are united around a fallacy, an illusion, a fantasy. As an exponent of the elaborate richness of the English language, Mr Speaker, you will know that there is a word for their current condition—denialism, a person’s choice to deny reality as a way to avoid a psychologically uncomfortable truth. Nothing could better sum up these unicorn-chasing Tories and the way that they can interpret, “No, we will not renegotiate the political agreement” into “Yes, we will give you everything the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) wants.” It is denialism madness. At some point, however, the hard reality will have to catch up with this Government. Can the Leader of the House explain what happens when the Prime Minister inevitably comes back with nothing? What is the process then?

I am grateful to the Leader of the House for confirming that there will no longer be a February recess. I am sure that that has gone down like a bucket of sick with some of our hon. Friends who have already planned their holidays. What is going to happen during that week? Is it going to be Brexit-related business? Is it going to be business like the business we see for next week? What happens to departmental questions? The normal rota has already been done, so can she explain to us exactly what we will be doing for that week given that the recess is to be lost? Mr Speaker, you will remember that I asked the Leader of the House quite clearly last week whether the February recess would be cancelled. “No” was the answer, just like she told me that the meaningful vote would not be delayed just before it actually was.

I have raised the issue of the feral pack-like behaviour of Conservative Members before. Yesterday, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) was on his feet, it was simply appalling. Every mention of Scotland or Scottish sent to departmental questions. The normal rota has already been done, so can she explain to us exactly what we will be doing for that week given that the recess is to be lost? Mr Speaker, you will remember that I asked the Leader of the House quite clearly last week whether the February recess would be cancelled. “No” was the answer, just like she told me that the meaningful vote would not be delayed just before it actually was.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of denialism. I suggest that it is the Scottish nationalists in this place who are in denial over the result of the Scottish independence referendum. It is interesting that one of my favourite newspapers, The National, reports that the hon. Gentleman himself is questioning the merits of a second referendum on EU membership because he feels it might harm the Scots’ chances of a second referendum on Scottish independence. If anyone is a denialist in this place, it is him. Not only that; he is also a pessimist. It is deeply disappointing that he is already saying that the Government’s attempts will fail. If he looks carefully at what has happened in the past two and a half years, he will see that the Prime Minister’s deal for withdrawing from the EU seeks to ensure that we can have our cake and eat it. We have successfully cherry-picked and done all the things that the EU said we would not do, because we will be protecting jobs and our economy at the same time as leaving the EU and fulfilling the referendum result, so he should be a bit more optimistic.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Brexit-related business during the second week of February. He will appreciate that there is a huge amount of Brexit-related business. He criticised the business for next week, but these are very important Brexit-related statutory instruments, as well as some instruments that are always debated on the Floor of the House of Commons. The House should wish to discuss those very important pieces of parliamentary businesses.

The hon. Gentleman also suggested—it was somewhat inverted-snobbery—that Members on the Government Benches have all been to private school. I am an ex-grammar school girl, and the Government side is dominated by people who have worked hard in this life and want to do something for their country. He should be ashamed for saying that, but not nearly as ashamed as his right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) should be for his appalling remarks in the Chamber suggesting that there is anything other than a 100% commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That was a dangerous and appalling thing to suggest, and it was completely untrue.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Can we have a debate to welcome today’s announcement by NHS England that thousands more GPs will be recruited, and that they will have extra staff, including trained professionals such as pharmacists?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We should all be delighted not only that the Government are making the biggest investment in the NHS in its history but that, as we heard today from Simon Stevens, the head of the NHS, with that investment, the NHS is training more doctors and nurses and, importantly, providing direct access so patients can go directly to a physiotherapist or somebody who can sort out their care needs more quickly. That will free up more time for GPs, so they can spend more time with the patients who need that.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be delighted to know that I went to a good school—it was approved.

We do not yet know when time will be allocated for a day of debates on departmental estimates, but we are asking that hon. and right hon. Members submit applications for such debates by Friday 8 February. The Leader of the House will know that I always try to help her to plan ahead. With that in mind, we have a very heavily subscribed application for a debate to celebrate International Women’s Day, which is on 8 March, on Thursday the 7th, if at all possible. We are anticipating an application for a debate to celebrate St David’s Day, on 1 March, with a debate on Welsh issues on Thursday 28 February.
May I remind the Leader of the House that, if the recess in February is cancelled or changed, that has an impact on important appointments and events that hon. and right hon. Members have had arranged in their constituencies for months in advance? This is not just about holidays; it is about important local events.

Andrea Leadsom: In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s final point, I totally agree, which is why I have apologised to Members for the fact that we are having to do this, and have made it clear that through the usual channels a lot of effort will be made to ensure hon. Members can continue to meet the needs of their constituents and so on.

The hon. Gentleman makes a bid for a debate on 1 March for St David’s day. Let us hope it is not snowed off—last year or the year before the debate sadly had to be cancelled because nobody could get to it. He also mentioned International Women’s Day, and I will look carefully at what we can do on both of them.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the fact that we are having to do this, and he will be aware that the Government are doing a lot to try and reduce and reform business rates to give our retail spaces a better chance so that we can all enjoy thriving town centres.

On the hon. Gentleman’s specific point about asset stripping and the policy of big business, I encourage him to raise that directly during questions to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on 12 February.

Fiona Bruce (Con): Across Britain, a trip up any road or down any street will be a chance, sadly, to see the litter—the detritus of our throwaway culture: cups and cartons, bottles and bags, from careless corporate coffee shops or feckless fast food outlets. The figures speak for themselves: according to Keep Britain Tidy smoking-related litter, alcohol-related litter and fast food-related litter are all on the increase. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has heroically led the campaign against single-use plastic, but may we now have a debate on packaging waste? That will give us a chance to consider the cause of this problem, rather than just nailing its effect. It might also give an opportunity to consider one of the most curious facets of change in our lifetime: that we have gone from the daily delivery of milk in a bottle which was recycled to plastic cartons obtained inconveniently from distant megastores. It is time that Ernie, the fastest milkman in the west, rode again.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the quality of his prose this morning. I am also very glad that he was able to join my fantastic Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), to launch the Great British Spring Clean recently. That will take place mainly between 22 and 24 March this year, and I encourage everyone to get out there with their hi-vis jackets and litter pickers and their local teams and to contribute.

My right hon. Friend is right to raise this issue; it is of huge concern, and always in the top three items that people in the country raise. Litter is a huge concern to all of us, and certainly it is a function of the improper use of packaging. I am very sympathetic, therefore, and my right hon. Friend might well want to seek at least a Backbench debate for all hon. Members to share their concerns.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May we have an early debate on the state of our town centres and the closure of Marks & Spencer stores? Marks & Spencer used to be a company with high ethical values; indeed, it used to buy a lot of its materials in Huddersfield for suiting and ladies’ fashions, but now its management is under a former Conservative vice-chairman and Member of Parliament, Archie Norman, who we know well from his asset stripping of Asda. We know from the involvement of his team in HBOS and other companies what they do; there is no ethical value there. May we have a debate on these asset strippers destroying our town centres?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes some very serious accusations, and I cannot share his enthusiasm for pointing at individuals and blaming them. Nevertheless, he makes an important point about the need to have thriving town centres; he is absolutely right to do that, and I am sure that the Government are doing a lot to try and reduce and reform business rates to give our retail spaces a better chance so that we can all enjoy thriving town centres.

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has raised this issue. The inter-ministerial working group I am chairing on behalf of the Prime Minister is looking at ways we can provide more support for the critical early years of a baby’s life, to ensure that we have strong, socially well secured and established human beings in our society, which is absolutely vital if we are to see the society change we want to see. I was delighted recently to visit the Lambeth Early Action Partnership, and more recently to go to Manchester with the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) to see the excellent work being done in family hubs and children’s centres. I will be delighted to join my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) at the conference she mentions.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): This week, we learned that there was a near miss involving a drone at Edinburgh airport in November 2016. Given that there have been two major disruptions at our international airports recently, would the Leader of the House consider granting a debate on this issue, which is a matter of great public concern?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this serious and concerning issue. She will be aware that there has been an urgent question on the subject. There is in fact a business in my constituency that is seeking to provide a solution to this problem, so I have a personal interest in it. She will be aware that we have Transport questions on 14 February, and I am sure that Ministers will update her then.
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Exeter city has just brought out an excellent report looking ahead to the security and growth of the city centre over the next 20 years. Across the border, however, my county town of Taunton is more like Aleppo than anything else. Following the request from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), may we please have a debate—in this place in Government time—on how town centres must look forward to visionary experiences as opposed to looking back to what has happened in history?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that local authorities and local enterprise partnerships need to plan properly for the thriving future of their town centres and regions. He makes a good point, and I would encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his particular issues.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I have been contacted by a group of women in my constituency who have been adversely affected by changes to their state pension age. They are struggling to make ends meet, and it is not good enough for the Government to keep saying that nothing further can be done for them. May we have a debate on this important issue in Government time so that we can try to reach consensus on how we can support these women?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have listened carefully to the concerns of that particular group of women. It was right to equalise the state retirement age, and the Government have taken steps, including committing more than £1 billion, to support those who were worst affected, so that no one will see their pension age change by more than 18 months, relative to the Pensions Act 1995 timetable, and that those with the most significant changes will receive at least seven years’ notice.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Last week, I held a Westminster Hall debate on the contribution that the furniture industry makes to our economy, in which Members from across the House highlighted the important role played by their small and medium-sized furniture manufacturers. Following on from that, may we have a debate in Government time on the importance of supporting SMEs across all industries?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that she does as chairman of the all-party parliamentary furniture industry group. She is right to stress the importance of SMEs to our economy, and she will be aware that small businesses are being supported with new investments, as part of our modern industrial strategy, to boost their productivity and ensure that they continue to thrive. I can tell her that 15 projects from around the United Kingdom have won a share of the £2 million business basics fund, which is part of our modern industrial strategy.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is absolutely unbelievable that the Home Secretary has announced a knife crime initiative this morning in the papers and on the radio. Where was his statement to this House? Why is he not here to address this House about one of the most crucial things facing our constituents up and down this country? Only a couple of days ago, a police chief told the Home Affairs Committee that 10,000 children were being exploited and used in county lines. Knife crime is rampant and young people are being slaughtered. Where is the Home Secretary? The Leader of the House wrote to him two weeks ago to express the concern raised by all Members across the House about this issue. Where is he? How can he announce this in the papers and on the radio? That gives us no opportunity to ask him about the progress of the serious violence strategy. I say to the right hon. Lady that this is an absolute disgrace, and that the people of this country will not understand why, in the face of this national emergency, the Home Secretary has gone missing.

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Gentleman’s grave concern, and he is absolutely right to raise the concerns of all right hon. and hon. Members about the appalling spike in knife crime. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary was talking about an amendment to the Offensive Weapons Bill that was laid yesterday. He wrote to Opposition Front Benchers, and I have asked him to send a copy of the letter to the hon. Gentleman. All Members will be aware that the matter has been discussed for some considerable time, and the new deterrent in the form of knife crime prevention orders is in effect trying to prevent young people from getting into a life of knife crime.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House very much for what she has said, which does at least explain the chronology of events. However, for the avoidance of doubt, let it be clear that it is utterly discourteous to the House of Commons for an important initiative to be announced outside of this Chamber by means of media interviews. The fact of which the right hon. Lady has helpedfully informed us—that the Home Secretary wrote to shadow Ministers—is of interest, but in terms of the priority of a statement in the House, it is frankly neither here nor there. The way in which Ministers are held to account is by interrogation in this Chamber. Simply writing a letter to an opposite number and then beating off to do a radio or television interview will not do. It is simply not up to the required standard.

I say to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who is one of the least partisan Members of this House and is naturally collaborative by instinct, that if a Minister does not come to this Chamber to announce a policy when he or she should, there are well-established means by which to ensure the presence of a Minister at the first parliamentary opportunity thereafter. If Members seek such an opportunity, it will be provided. Among other things, we will all be interested to know what possible credible explanation for the conduct can be proffered to the House by a Minister. In the absence of a credible explanation, what of course is required is an unqualified apology.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): As colleagues around the House know, I am also not enormously party political, and I completely agree with the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) that the House should have been informed.

There is one issue that is bringing this House into disrepute today, and that is the fact that a Member of this House is in prison and continues to be an MP. My
[Sir Mike Penning] constituents and other constituents around the country do not understand how someone can be convicted and go to prison and yet still be a Member of this House. The police officers who protect us here would lose their pensions and lose everything. Something is seriously wrong, so can we have a debate—in the time that it seems we now have—and change the law to ensure that if someone goes to prison, they will not be in this House, so that the public can believe that what we do is right?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is quite correct that it is unacceptable for the residents of Peterborough that their Member of Parliament is unable to represent them. Not only is she physically unable to represent them, but she is choosing not to do what I think all right hon. and hon. Members would say is the right thing to do.

Under the Recall of MPs Act 2015, an MP becomes subject to the recall petition process if they are convicted of a criminal offence in the United Kingdom and receive a custodial sentence, including a suspended sentence, which is not the case here. In the event of a criminal conviction, the recall condition will not be met unless the appeal period expires without the conviction, sentence or order having been overturned on appeal. What that means in layman’s terms is that the recall petition process will not be triggered until all appeals are finalised. I agree with my right hon. Friend that it would be right for that Member to stand down to allow her constituents to choose a new Member of Parliament.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I am not sure the Prime Minister will share the enthusiastic call of the Leader of the House for the citizens of this country to come out on to the streets in hi-vis jackets after the example we have seen in France.

More immediately, yesterday’s Supreme Court ruling on the Disclosure and Barring Service means that the Government should urgently correct the blight that is ruining so many lives, often for minor offences committed many years before. Given the limited nature of next week’s business, will the Government take the earliest opportunity to end this scandal? That would have support on both sides of the House, and it would transform the lives of so many and enable them to contribute to the economy and to society.

Andrea Leadsom: On the right hon. Gentleman’s first point, I think we would call them the “gilets verts” because they are a green version of the gilets jaunes. Perhaps we could rebrand it and have a positive form. He makes a serious second point, and he is right to raise the issue. I urge him to take it up at Justice questions on Tuesday 5 February.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Can we have a debate on unique foods? Last week, as many of us celebrated Rabbie Burns, Sheila Gray of Fochabers ice cream parlour in Moray, in her own nod to the bard, was creating a new variety of ice cream that blends whisky, tattie scones and haggis. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Sheila on this latest imaginative variety, particularly as a loyal customer, 84-year-old Charlie Armour, described the ice cream as “better than sex”?

Andrea Leadsom: Well, with 84 years of experience, I am sure Charlie would know. I am not sure it would be my first choice of flavour, but I guess it would have to be tasted to be believed. I understand that Sheila attracts customers from far and wide, and I am sure the ice cream parlour is a fantastic tourist attraction. On top of that, I believe she is a tireless fundraiser in the local community. Our thriving food and drink sector contributes almost £30 billion to our economy, and we have people like Sheila to thank for that. Congratulations to her for her extraordinary new invention, and I hope to try her creations for myself one day.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am sure we all have many cases involving Child Maintenance Service maladministration. The issues are legion, but one example involves the CMS being informed of an ex-partner being in work in September 2016 and the CMS taking until December 2017 to confirm the employment, but by May 2018—after nearly two years—still no payment had been made. Can we have a debate on this important issue so that Ministers can hear just how badly this organisation is run?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a concerning issue that has arisen in his constituency, and he is right to do so. If he would like to write to me, I can take it up with the Department for Work and Pensions on his behalf, or he might like to seek an Adjournment debate to discuss his more general concerns.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Rough sleeping is the visible sign of homelessness, and the rough sleeping figures should be announced today. I am waiting to see what the figures look like, but it cannot have escaped anyone’s attention that the temperatures in this country are plunging. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on what he is doing to ensure that not only do we deal with rough sleeping but that we safeguard people so that they do not die on our streets in this terrible weather?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has been an advocate for doing more on homelessness for a very long time, and I pay tribute to him. It is so cold outside now, and he is right that we have to do everything we can to make sure people have somewhere warm and safe to sleep. He will be aware that the Government have made this a domestic priority, and I believe the homelessness Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), visited a night shelter just two days ago and has made it her priority to see the homeless numbers dropping as soon as possible.

I have been working with the Director General of the House of Commons to ensure that the homeless people sleeping outside Parliament are better cared for and helped to find night shelters. It is, of course, a very difficult and challenging problem with many facets. Even in cases where night shelters are provided, sometimes homeless people do not want to use them, but my hon. Friend is right to keep raising the issue. It is a big priority for the Government to see those numbers halved and eventually eradicated.
Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): First, let me thank the Leader of the House and the Backbench Business Committee for allocating, on 7 February, a debate on antisocial behaviour, because that is a growing problem in many constituencies.

I wish to raise with the Leader of the House the concern of a number of people who took seasonal work in Hull, and around the UK, with Grotto Hire UK as Santa’s little helpers before Christmas. They learnt this week that they have lost thousands of pounds in pay because the owner of the Hull-based company, Tony Jennings, has put two of his companies into liquidation to avoid paying staff and suppliers. He now refuses to take calls from the staff he employed. Should not the Government allocate time for a debate on who is a fit and proper person to set up a company, and on ending the spiv practice of putting companies into liquidation, in suspect circumstances, and running off with the takings, only to open up another company with another name?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue; I have seen similar situations arise in my constituency. It is a huge concern that some people seem determined deliberately to rip off those who have given of their time and their work, and then seek to open a different company and, in effect, steal these workers’ pay. That is an appalling practice. She might like to seek an Adjournment debate to raise these issues. Alternatively, I encourage her to raise them at Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on 12 February.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): As the owner of Maximus, I welcomed the Government’s introduction of animal welfare regulations last October. However, many doggy day care services and boarding kennels, such as Waggingtons in my constituency, are worried that the regulations are over-complex and risk putting such companies out of business. Will a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister come to the Dispatch Box to explain how the regulations were put together and what dialogue will take place with doggy day care providers? Will a Minister explain to these people how they are able to work within the regulations without being put out of business?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend rightly recognises the high animal welfare standards that we have in this country, and we are committed to continuing to be among the best in the world in our commitment to animal welfare. I encourage him to write to DEFRA Ministers seeking further clarification. Alternatively, if he wishes to write to me, I will take the matter up directly with the Department on his behalf.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): May we have a debate in Government time on fairer funding for northern constituencies, particularly those with a former coalfield history? I was shocked to see the front page of The Times today suggesting that Members of this House would be offered bribes or sweeteners if they sign up to the Prime Minister’s deal, which we know will make those constituencies worse off. Given that the Government have taken £6 billion out of northern constituencies, is it not time that they held a proper debate on fairer funding for the north, instead of offering bribes and pork barrel politics?

Andrea Leadsom: This Government have shown a huge commitment to the north—through the northern powerhouse, the city deals, the devolution deals and the establishment of Mayors in some of our great northern cities. The Government have invested more than a quarter of a trillion pounds in infrastructure since 2010 through public and private investment, and the public investment part of that is 14% higher, on average, than the figure under Labour. We have invested in the biggest rail programme since Victorian times and the largest road building programme since the 1970s, and much of that is focused on our northern towns and cities. I just do not think it is reasonable for the hon. Lady to suggest that nothing has been done for the north; there has been increased employment, increased investment and increased opportunities.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Following on from what the Leader of the House has said, there is great news in Wellingborough, where we have the electrification of the midland main line and big improvements on the Chowns Mill roundabout on the A45. There is, however, one slight problem: bridges need to be demolished to get the electrification done. As she is a Northamptonshire MP, she will know that one cannot go from the M1 to the east coast without going along the A45, but that is going to be closed westbound for nine months and the local bridges in my constituency have been demolished. Unless this is a sneaky plan to keep me stuck in Wellingborough until after Brexit day, will she sneak out a written statement on Monday about how we are going to deal with this chaos?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope my hon. Friend is not suggesting for a moment that he would not love to be trapped in Wellingborough until after Brexit day; it is a very nice place, after all, and I would happily come to visit him there. He will be aware that we have Transport questions on 14 February, when he might like to take up this issue. I share his concerns, which are specific to Northamptonshire, and he might also like to seek an Adjournment debate.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Whether it is regarding the failure to send cervical screening letters to more than 50,000 women, the inhumane approach to personal independence payment assessments, or the failure to bring in 90% of the recruits our Army needs, the disastrous shortcomings of Capita are all too clear, so may we have an urgent debate in Government time on the failure of the Government’s privatisation strategy?

Andrea Leadsom: Concerns have been expressed about Capita, and the hon. Lady will be aware that the Cabinet Office has significantly changed the arrangements for monitoring the way in which Government contracts are fulfilled. That work has been very important and remains ongoing. The hon. Lady raises some specific issues, which I encourage her to raise at Cabinet Office questions on 6 February. She might also perhaps seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all Members can discuss their own concerns.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): My local Brecon and Radnorshire branch of the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, under its capable chair, Mrs Elaine Stephens, and her hard-working team,
carries out tremendous work for farmers and farm workers who have for various reasons fallen on hard times. Will my right hon. Friend grant time for a debate on what more can be done to encourage such worthwhile and valued charities as RABI?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to Elaine. As a former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and someone who represents a rural constituency, I know at first hand how hard farmers work and how much they need our support at times. I am aware of the amazing work carried out by the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, and know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food met representatives of farming charities, including RABI, just last November to discuss how they were supporting farmers in the aftermath of the 2018 drought. It is vital that we continue to work to support farmers as we leave the European Union, and I certainly look forward to the opportunities that will result for our farmers and food producers.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Over the past few weeks, I have been contacted by several citizens advice bureaux advisers who are experiencing increased delays when they call the employment and support allowance helpline. I am told that delays of more than half an hour and up to an hour are a daily and commonplace occurrence. I am sure that the Leader of the House will agree that this is unacceptable, given the pressure her Government are putting on these agencies. May we have a statement on the performance of this so-called helpline?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a concerning issue of which I am not personally aware from my own constituency case load. I encourage him either to table a parliamentary question, or to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the issue directly with Ministers.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The Leader of the House is right to highlight the Government’s powerful devolution agenda, including in respect of public transport, especially local bus services. Unfortunately, there has been no progress on this policy area in Greater Manchester; in fact, the local Labour leadership is slashing 33 bus services across Greater Manchester. In the run-up to the local elections in May, may we have a debate on how people can hold their local politicians to account?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a strong voice for his area and raises a good point. The Greater Manchester combined authority and the Mayor have all the powers to initiate improvements to local bus services, thanks to our Bus Services Act 2017. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Functions and Amendment) Order 2019 will mean that clear responsibility for bus reform and funding lies with the Mayor, whom local people can hold to account. That is a further step in our powerful devolution agenda. With that order, we will have completed the suite of mayoral powers that we promised as part of the original devolution deal, which unlocked £900 million of Government investment in Greater Manchester’s infrastructure.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House arrange a statement to update us on progress in implementing the recommendations of the Dame Laura Cox report into bullying and harassment?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady gives me the opportunity to inform Members that the House Commission met to discuss progress on the Cox recommendations just last Monday. There is progress. The key recommendations have all been committed to by the House Commission. Work is under way to establish an informal group that will meet to discuss how to remove Members of Parliament from the responsibility of measuring each other’s transgressions. Further work is under way both on the six-month review of the independent complaints procedure and on Laura Cox’s recommendations on how to ensure that historical allegations can be brought before the independent complaints procedure. I will update the House further as soon as I am able to do so.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Many parts of the country are struggling with difficult winter weather conditions. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the council workers who drive gritters and the health services who keep people safe, and may we have a statement on what we can all do to keep vulnerable elderly and disabled people safe during these difficult winter conditions?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Winter weather does draw our attention to parts of society that come under the most pressure—from hospitals all the way through to people experiencing loneliness and isolation. I join him in praising all those in local services who have worked hard all year to prepare for winter. He will be aware that Ministers across a number of Departments support the work of local resilience forums that are dedicated to ensuring that local areas are ready for all kinds of weather-related incidents. Of course, at this time of year, we should all be mindful of our most vulnerable neighbours, particularly elderly and disabled members of our community who are living in rural or isolated parts of the country.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Yesterday, the Transport Committee heard evidence that the underfunding of local authorities that are responsible for administering the older people’s concessionary bus pass has led to the loss of vital services. This morning, in departmental questions, many hon. Members raised their concern that pushing responsibility for free TV licences for the over-75s on to the BBC will inevitably lead to vulnerable people losing a much-valued benefit. May we have time for a debate on how this Government are wilfully undermining the measures that Labour introduced to improve the lives of older citizens, and to tackle precisely the social isolation that the Leader of the House was just talking about, while trying to dodge responsibility for the cuts?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that we have Transport questions on 14 February at which she can raise the very important point about bus services. In particular, the Government have done a significant amount to invest in ensuring that we have decent bus networks, and it is for local authorities to ensure that
that provision is made. With regards to her point about BBC TV licences, the BBC is an independent institution. We have just had Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions, and I hope that she raised that directly with Ministers. She raises an important point, and if it was not raised then, I encourage her to seek another opportunity such as an Adjournment debate.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Ethiopia, I have seen at first hand the vital work that is done by aerospace companies such as Airbus, Rolls-Royce and Bombardier in boosting British exports and investments in that country. Can we have a debate on the importance of the aerospace industry so that we can give credit to the leadership and the workforce of Airbus, Rolls-Royce, Bombardier and many other companies for the work that they do on behalf of the United Kingdom, on behalf of our exports and on behalf of our economy?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that the aerospace sector is an absolutely vital part of the UK economy. I join him in thanking those companies for the excellent work that they do to support us and other economies around the world such as Ethiopia’s. He might like to raise his specific point at Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on Tuesday 12 February.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): We already know from the Prime Minister that the business on 14 February will be further votes on Brexit. May I just say to the Leader of the House that Valentine’s day is a bad day on which to organise a break-up? In the meantime, can we at least make it clear that we will rule out a no-deal Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: I must say that I do like the way that the hon. Gentleman raises the subject of love at every possible opportunity, and I think he is right to do so—let us hope that this Chamber can learn a bit of distress among a significant number of women?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Lady’s point. If she would like to write to me, I can encourage him to participate in the Adjournment debate secured by the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) later today. If he then wants to write to me, I can take up the matter with the Department for Work and Pensions on his behalf, or he can write directly to the Department himself.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House aware of alarming reports that the Food Standards Agency is to restrict the supply of cannabidiol products in the UK? Any such move would risk the supply of higher strength CBD products to a number of seriously ill patients who are waiting for medicinal cannabis. Will the Leader of the House seek assurances from the Health Secretary that this is actually not the case?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue and his understanding of the situation. I encourage him to participate in the Adjournment debate secured by the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) later today. If he then wants to write to me, I can take up the matter with the Department for Work and Pensions on his behalf, or he can write directly to the Department himself.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The UK Government believe that there has been widespread abuse of the IR35 rules, even though only a minority of companies and individuals have ever been found to be in breach of the rules, and HMRC has lost cases against its own contractors. I have a constituent who operates as a self-employed IT consultant. Most of his work is in England, but under the new rules that the Government are introducing, any reimbursement that he gets for necessary flights and hotels will be treated as taxable income. This means that his business model will fail or that he will have to move from my constituency down to England. His overheads have already increased because of the additional insurance needed against any spurious HMRC investigations. Given that the Tories are supposed to be the party that protects entrepreneurs, can we have a Government statement or a debate—and possibly a rethink—on the impact of these rules changes?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is raising a tax issue that is specific to his constituent, and he is right to do so in the Chamber. However, I encourage him either to seek an Adjournment debate or to table a parliamentary question to Ministers, as it is not a matter to which I can respond from the Dispatch Box today.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): This week we should have had a debate in Westminster Hall on the regulation of non-surgical cosmetic procedures, but sadly it was cancelled because of the illness of the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), who would have been leading the debate—I send him my best wishes for a speedy recovery. People continue to suffer adverse effects as a result of the unregulated administration of cosmetic products by non-medical practitioners. May we have an urgent debate in Government time to discuss putting an end to this corrupt practice?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. Lady has raised this issue a number of times in the Chamber, and I absolutely commend her for doing so, as it is of grave
[Andrea Leadsom]

concern. I was not aware that the Westminster Hall debate had to be cancelled, and I am sorry for that. I would encourage her perhaps to write to Mr Speaker to seek reinstatement of that debate at the earliest opportunity.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Since the Home Secretary’s announcement that the Government would adopt a public health approach to address violence, we have heard nothing—nothing on funding and nothing on how, just gimmicks. Today he has announced knife crime prevention orders—in the media, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) stated, not in this House. Children as young as 12 years old are being criminalised. Instead of criminalising them, we need to tackle the root causes. When can we have an urgent statement on how this fits into the Government’s supposed public health approach?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has raised this issue a number of times. I have been very pleased to be able to give Government time to two debates on what is an incredibly serious issue that concerns hon. and right hon. Members right across the House. She will be aware that the Government have published a serious violence strategy backed by £40 million of new funding. She will be aware of the £200 million youth endowment fund to provide support in getting children and young people at risk off the path towards crime. She will be aware of the £22 million over the next two years for an early intervention youth fund to support youth groups in communities with early intervention and prevention measures, and the £1.5 million for the anti-knife crime community fund to help communities themselves to tackle knife crime. It is an enormous priority for the Government, as she well knows. I pay tribute to her for continuing to raise this here, and absolutely assure that it remains a top priority for the Government.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Mr Saberi and Mrs Habibimarand are 83 and 73-year-old great-grandparents who live in my constituency. They have lived in Edinburgh for over 40 years. Their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are all British citizens. The Home Office has refused their application to stay. Disgracefully, their latest correspondence from the Home Office says that because they look after their severely autistic grandson while his mother is at work, they should be able to look after themselves in Iran. The severe emotional distress that their leaving would cause to their grandson could be exacerbated by him visiting their empty flat. This is a disgraceful response from the Home Office. Can we have an urgent debate on the responsibilities and resources of local authorities to protect these very vulnerable young people?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman’s request. I certainly have my fair share of constituents who have struggled with the CMS. I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that hon. Members can share their own experiences and concerns.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am sure that, like many other Members, the Leader of the House and I have our fair share of complaints about the Child Maintenance Group, with long delays in recovering arrears reaching thousands of pounds. There is also an issue about whether the change in circumstances threshold is at the right level. The current level of 25% seems to cause quite a lot of injustice and frustration all round. Can we have a debate on whether this service is currently meeting the expectations that people have of it?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear of the situation for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents. He will be aware that the warm home discount scheme, measures on improving energy efficiency and the energy company obligation form part of the Government’s determination...
to ensure that people can keep themselves warm in winter. I suggest that he raises his constituency concern in a written parliamentary question to the Department.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Pubs are an important part of our local communities, but too many of them are closing. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Friends of Ye Olde Cross in Ryton in my constituency, who on Tuesday this week took ownership of Ye Olde Cross as a community pub in the heart of the village? I declare an interest, as one of more than 300 community shareholders in the pub.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I congratulate the hon. Lady and all the other community shareholders. I am sure she will be there pulling a pint at some point over the weekend, and we will want to see a photograph of that. She is right; pubs in our communities are vital. They bring people together and provide somewhere to chat and share views about Brexit and all manner of things. They are the venue for many happy discussions. We appreciate the importance of the pub. That is why the Government have sought to keep taxes down on a pint of beer and a glass of wine, and we are doing everything we can from both a fiscal and community support point of view to keep our pubs going.

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Holiday hunger is a scourge in communities like mine, and for too many young children, their free school meal is the best and sometimes only nutritious meal they get. That stops during the holidays, and we have a challenge in this place to tackle that. In the meantime, my community does not want to wait for long-term strategies but wants to get on right away. That is why I am supporting a consortium of organisations, led by the Active Partners Trust, that are making a bid to the Department for Education for a scheme that would feed and provide activities for 2,200 young people in my community in the holidays. I do not expect an explicit commitment to that from the Leader of the House today, but might she help by providing Government time to debate that or another opportunity for me to raise my support for this important bid?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on that bid and wish him success with it. All Members are aware of children in their constituencies who suffer from holiday hunger. In my constituency, there are also children who would prefer to be at school than at home because of not just hunger but the way they are treated during the school holidays, which is unacceptable in our society. The Government are seeking to do all manner of things to improve the plight of those children. I encourage him to raise that excellent initiative at Education questions on Monday 4 February.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Last week a Backbench Business debate was held on myalgic encephalomyelitis, led by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). I know that thousands of ME sufferers across the UK really appreciated their long-standing suffering being aired and given a proper discussion in this place, including my constituent, Kim Clugston, who has suffered with this chronic condition since 2007. Many sufferers of ME want to know more about what the Government and the national health service plan to do to address their condition. Will the Leader of the House call for a statement from the Health Secretary on plans for improving the research and treatment of ME?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is right; that was a well-attended debate, and I think all of us have received emails from our constituents thanking Parliament for having the debate and at last recognising a condition which all too often simply gets ignored. He is right to seek further information from the Department of Health and Social Care on its response to that debate. Perhaps he could raise it at the next Health questions or seek an Adjournment debate, so that he can ask Ministers those questions directly.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): With reference to the earlier exchange between the Leader and the shadow Leader of the House, DEFRA is still struggling to get through 88 statutory instruments before the end of March. The Government have cancelled the debate on the REACH directive next week and one on air quality on Wednesday. How can the Opposition be expected to do the right job of scrutiny if things get cancelled and we do not have the resource to pull things together at relatively short notice? Will she think about giving us some more money so that we can do this job of scrutiny properly?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am not entirely sure what the hon. Gentleman’s question is. As I made clear to the Leader of the Opposition, I am closely monitoring the passage of secondary legislation, as well as primary legislation, and I remain confident that SIs that need to be made before 29 March are being brought forward as necessary. It is a carefully managed process—in fact, a new process introduced in this Session—to make sure that we can manage all the business that is needed by the time we leave the EU.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Three extra sitting days for private Member’s Bills are welcome, but when will we see the necessary money resolution for the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill that was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)? It was given a Second Reading by the House, and surely it is time for the Government to respect that vote.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The Government have an excellent record of supporting private Members’ Bills to the statute book. In the 2010 Parliament 31 Bills received Royal Assent, and if we include the 2015-17 Parliament the number more than doubles that of the 2005 Parliament. Some excellent new legislation has been made as a result of the efforts of private Members’ Bills.

We support the principle of family unity and have helped to reunite 24,700 family members in the past five years. Our policy is clear that we want to support refugee families. The hon. Gentleman asks about the progress of the specific Bill to which he referred. We give money resolutions in the appropriate order as the Bills come before Parliament.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will our statute books be ready for exit day?
Andrea Leadsom: As I have said—this is now the third time of saying it today—I am closely monitoring the primary and secondary legislation that is needed for Brexit date, and I am confident that we will be able to pass all the legislation necessary by 29 March.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Chris Elmore.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): You are a kind and generous man, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Although he is not in his place, may I echo the calls made by the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for a debate for Welsh MPs and anyone else who would like to join in around St David’s Day? I am sure that the Leader will echo my calls to wish the Welsh team all the very best on Friday night in their match against the French as the Six Nations begins.

May I ask for a statement? Two weeks ago, St David’s church in Pontycymmer in the Garw valley in my constituency was broken into in an act of mindless vandalism. The vandals achieved nothing apart from damaging crosses to try to gain access to a safe, which they could not do. They forced open lead windows, leaving huge amounts of damage. Rather than asking for a debate about mindless thuggery and vandalism, may I ask for a debate whenever the Leader of the House would like about the importance of the Church not just as a place of worship but for bringing communities together? In my constituency, the community has rallied and raised money to repair the church, and it will carry on being a hub for the community and my constituents.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely share the hon. Gentleman’s good wishes to the Welsh rugby team on Friday night. In fact, a member of my office staff who is Welsh will be at the Stade de France. In return, I am sure that the Gentleman will wish the English all success on Saturday against Ireland. There might be some disagreement here. Come on England! Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker.

However, the hon. Gentleman has raised a very serious point. I am so sorry to hear about the break-in at the church that he mentioned. The mindlessness of such vandalism is appalling: it does so much to destroy people’s sense of security and safety.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Church does so much good in our communities, from running food banks to providing help for elderly and disabled people and those who are lonely. Churches are a vital part of our communities. I would personally welcome it if the hon. Gentleman sought a Back-Bench debate so that we could all share in a discussion of the excellent work done not just by our churches but by, for example, our synagogues and Sikh temples.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Just to help the Leader of the House, I can inform her that the rugby Super League starts tonight.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I remind the Leader of the House that the outcome of the England-Ireland match could mean a great deal in respect of the confidence and supply motion? [Laughter.] I jest, of course.

Let me now raise a very serious matter. Last weekend, during Sunday mass, a Roman Catholic cathedral in the Philippines was struck by horror and tragedy when two bombs exploded, killing at least 20 people and wounding more than 100. Responsibility for that devastating attack, which killed both civilians and some police officers who were trying to protect them, was claimed by Daesh.

Across the world, terrorists are picking on, attacking and killing those who are worshipping their God in their place of worship. Will the Leader of the House agree to arrange a statement or a debate on this ongoing and global terrorist violence?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised an incredibly serious point about the right of those who wish to worship, whatever their faith, and the appalling abuse of that right by terrorists. He often stands up for religious freedom in this place, and he is absolutely right to do so. I commend him for what he has said today, and I encourage him to seek, for instance, an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the matter further.

As for the hon. Gentleman’s other point, I can tell him that I shall be with a very good friend who originates from Northern Ireland, so I think that we will be eating curry and celebrating whatever the outcome on Saturday.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I was grateful to the Leader of the House for confirming that if the Government have no motion under section 13(1) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to present to the House before 13 February, they will instead table a motion under a different part of section 13 on that day. Will she clarify, however, what the position will be if the Government have tabled a section 13(1) motion by that date, and it has been voted on and rejected? Will she confirm that in those circumstances, the Government will table a statement and a motion in neutral terms which will be amendable?

Andrea Leadsom: It is difficult for me to specify exactly what the process for agreeing any further motions will be in the event of different political outcomes. As my right hon. Friend will know, if we do achieve a revised deal, we will bring it back to the House for a second meaningful vote as soon as we possibly can.
Point of Order

12.3 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During business questions the Leader of the House announced that the February recess would not go ahead, but she was not able to give us any details about what type of business would be considered during that week, or whether there would even be departmental questions. Have you, Mr Deputy Speaker, been notified of whether arrangements have been put in place, given that this will be happening in only two weeks’ time? Most important, has the position been communicated to the staff of the House, on whom we rely in order to conduct our business?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I assure the hon. Gentleman that I had not been informed. I was listening with great interest, like everyone else in the Chamber. What I will say is that business can change, and I should have thought that communicating the information to the staff before communicating it to the House would have been the wrong procedure. I am sure that there will be a wish to accommodate the needs of staff as well, but, as we know, the House’s business must continue: it is a priority.

So no, I was not told: I was in the same position as everyone else. Quite rightly, we were all told at the same time.

Fashion Industry

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE
Select Committee Statement

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We now come the Select Committee statement. I call Mary Creagh to speak for up to 10 minutes.

12.4 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to present to Parliament this interim report on the sustainability of the fashion industry, the 15th report of this Parliament’s Environmental Audit Committee. I also thank the dedicated staff and Committee members who, despite the Brexit crisis, continue to work tirelessly to hold the Government to account on environmental protection, and I am delighted to see so many members in their place.

We launched our inquiry last June to examine the social and environmental impact of fast fashion and the garment industry and to consider what actions consumers, retailers and the Government must take. Our final report will be published next month. The subject of today’s statement is the interim report, which focuses on retailers’ responsibility to ensure they employ people fairly and reduce fashion’s footprint and to ensure that fashion does not literally cost us the earth.

We heard evidence that fast fashion encouraged the over-purchase, over-consumption and under-utilisation of clothes. This leads to excessive waste. In the UK, we throw 11 million items of clothing worth £140 million into the bin every year. People in this country buy more clothes than people in any other European country: 27 kilos per person a year, or two big suitcases, which is twice what the stylish Italians buy. This is spurred on by retailers selling clothes at pocket money prices—£2 T-shirts, dresses for a fiver—and encouraging consumers constantly to change their wardrobes, to stay on trend, to instagram it and to treat garments as single-use items.

If retailers are selling their T-shirts for £2, how much are the people making them getting paid? The answer is not enough, and they are sometimes working in terrible conditions. As Livia Firth from Eco-Age said this morning on Radio 4, we wear the stories of the people who make our clothes, and if we wear those stories, we must reflect deeply on the fact that five years ago the Rana Plaza building collapsed in Bangladesh, killing 1,130 garment workers. It was the biggest industrial accident of the modern age. The victims were mostly young women producing clothes in inhumane conditions and being paid poverty wages to fuel fast fashion on the UK high street.

Our inquiry has heard that harsh working conditions are not just a problem in Asia and China. We have heard worrying evidence of illegal practices in clothes factories here in the UK, particularly in Leicester, where 10,000 textile workers produce more than 1 million items of clothing a week. One whistleblower told me they saw fire exits padlocked shut. Online retailer Missguided told us that two of its inspectors were manhandled by factory bosses. It raises the question: if that is how factory owners treat their potential customers, what are the conditions being endured by their workers?
We heard that workers were working long, gruelling shifts and often earning as little as £3.50 an hour. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs told us that since 2012 more than 90 factories in the UK have been caught in breach of minimum wage regulations, illegally underpaying their workers, and have been forced to pay out £90,000 in wage arrears—an average of £900 per worker. David Metcalf, the director of Labour Market Enforcement, said in his first annual strategy that labour abuses, exploitation and modern slavery were all part of a single continuum of abuse and needed to be tackled holistically.

Last autumn, we wrote to the UK’s top 10 fashion retailers, four major online retailers and two supermarkets, Tesco and Asda. We asked 16 questions—for example, whether they were signed up to the Waste and Resources Action Programme’s sustainable clothing action plan to reduce their carbon, water and waste footprint or to Act, Collaboration, Transformation, an initiative by the global garment workers union IndustriALL that works towards a living wage for all garment workers through collective bargaining, and about their use of sustainable cotton and recycling. Based on their replies, we have grouped them into three categories: most engaged, moderately engaged and least engaged. Only six of the 16 retailers are signed up to that ACT global trade union initiative. We were pretty shocked to see a group of major household name retailers failing to take action to promote action to protect their workers. Let us take their responses in turn.

The most engaged retailers were ASOS, M&S, Tesco, Primark and Burberry. They all use organic or sustainable cotton in some of their garments and recycle their materials. They all have in-store take-back schemes or recycling banks. However, the Committee was shocked to hear that Burberry incinerated over £26 million of clothing last year. We welcome its commitment to end this completely unsustainable practice.

All five of these engaged retailers are members of the Ethical Trading Initiative, which aims to improve conditions for workers globally. The Committee particularly welcomes ASOS becoming the only retailer to sign a global framework agreement with IndustriALL, the global trade union, committing to the highest standards on trade union rights, health and safety, and labour relations. We would like to see many more retailers follow its lead. We believe that freedom of association is far better than company audits at driving up worker protection.

The moderately engaged retailers were Next, Debenhams, Arcadia Group and Asda. These retailers are the proverbial curate’s egg, taking some steps towards sustainability in the social and environmental spheres, but still falling short. For example, Next does not run take-back schemes for used clothing, saying that it would just be too expensive. Arcadia has one take-back scheme in one Oxford Street store out of its 2,500 UK shops. None was committed to reporting on climate change risk and only Next is taking action to tackle hazardous chemical discharges in its fabrics supply chain.

Our real concerns involve the least engaged group of retailers. JD Sports, Sports Direct, Amazon UK, TK Maxx, Boohoo and Missguided are clear industry laggards, and Kurt Geiger did not even give us the courtesy of a response. I leave hon. Members to draw their own conclusions about that. None has signed up to WRAP’s sustainable clothing action plan to reduce their carbon, water and waste footprint. Internationally, none has signed the ACT labour rights agreement.

Amazon was notable in its lack of engagement. It is taking none of the sustainability actions that we asked it about, nor has it signed up to ACT or the Ethical Trading Initiative. Its size, online reach and potential for growth as a fashion retailer mean it must get serious about its responsibilities.

We also have major concerns about the online retailer Boohoo’s approach to trade unions. When we asked its joint CEO, Carol Kane, about unionisation at its distribution depot in Blackburn, she told us that it would recognise a trade union if there was demand from workers but there was not really any sort of demand. Shortly after that, we got a letter from Mike Aylward, from the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers trade union, contesting her evidence. He said that Boohoo “has, over a prolonged period of time refused even the most basic level of engagement with Usdaw and appears hostile to the very idea of recognising a trade union.”

We recommend that Boohoo engages with USDAW as a priority and stops blocking union recognition and collective bargaining for its UK workers and its workers overseas.

This interim report shows that the current business model for the UK fashion industry is unsustainable. We are disappointed that so few large retailers and supermarkets are showing leadership. If we are to tackle climate change, cut emissions and reduce fashion’s heavy footprint, these socially exploitative and environmentally damaging practices must end. Retailers must do more. By using this report, customers and consumers can make informed choices about where they choose to spend their money. We know they want to use their spending power wisely. It is time that retailers follow their lead. We will be setting out a blueprint when our full report is published. I commend this report to the House.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, you will know just from looking at me that I was the Minister for fashion for six years and the hon. Lady will know just from looking at me that none of my clothes enjoys a single-use outing.

I warmly welcome the hon. Lady’s report, which I urge Ministers to consider. The British fashion industry is one of the most successful parts of our economy and the British Fashion Council does a huge amount to promote it and, indeed, to promote sustainability. Does she agree that her report is so good it should not gather dust, and that Ministers and other willing Members should work with her and fashion stakeholders to give British fashion a fantastic competitive edge in being the world’s leading sustainable fashion industry?

Mary Creagh: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. He is right that the UK fashion industry is a £32 billion industry. Areas such as my own in West Yorkshire have a long and proud tradition of textile manufacturing, weaving and spinning—I have the Sirdar factory in my Wakefield constituency—and of reusing and recycling: industries are using doddy and mungo in mattresses, carpeting and bedding. So this is a proud industry. We found that no one is speaking for the end-to-end industry. There are people focused on the
high street and people focused on the British Fashion Council side of things—all the exciting creativity—and then there are the textile manufacturers, but they are not really altogether in one group. We think that they need to speak with one voice.

Last week, I visited the UK Textile Centre of Excellence in Huddersfield, where I saw some of the plasma technology and digital laser technology that it is inventing to reduce fashion’s footprint and to give clothing antimicrobial properties so that it becomes more waterproof. So instead of processes using chemicals that wash off and wash down the drain, they are done at reasonably low temperatures with no chemical or water discharges. This is the future of fashion. We are inventing it here, but it is being exploited by a US company, which will shortly be listing on AIM—the alternative investment market. We need to keep this home-grown technology in our country. We have fantastic heritage brands. I am wearing a John Smedley sweater, made in Derbyshire, which has been worn at least 1,000 times—and darned. It offers lifetime repair and reuse services, as do Church’s for shoes and Burberry for raincoats, which are made in the constituency next door to Wakefield: the constituency of Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. We have to celebrate what is good and shut down the bad things.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for this report, which we welcome. I note the reluctance of certain clothing manufacturers to co-operate in any attempt to audit the environmental impact of their business and, in one case, a point-blank refusal to engage at all.

Climate change does not respect political sensitivities. Whatever is said in this Chamber will make no difference to the rate of global temperature increase unless we can reduce our consumption of fossil fuels globally. Every area of our lives needs to be geared to that objective fact. Does the Chair of the Select Committee share my hope that more of the major retailers will sign up to the sustainable clothing action plan? Clearly, there is a way to go both with pollution, especially the release of micro-fibres into the environment, and with the climate change implications of fast fashion.

Transition towards a globally sustainable pattern of clothing consumption will not be easy, but does my hon. Friend share my conviction that companies that set out to do the right thing will reap the rewards of their initiative? Customer trust in brands is essential to clothing retailers and trust in those brands’ environmental credentials will be an increasingly important part of the way consumers feel about them. Companies that are already striving to improve their environmental impact will be better placed to meet any regulatory or financial changes that may come about as a response to climate change.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the fashion industry can and must contribute to the move towards a more sustainable pattern of global consumption, and does she share my trust that the Government will take the recommendations from the Environmental Audit Committee very seriously when they come out in the final report?

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend the shadow Minister for that question. He is absolutely right. If we have just 12 years to tackle damaging climate change before we reach certain tipping points, every sector and industry in the UK economy is going to have to tackle its carbon, waste and water footprints. Signing up to initiatives such as SCAP will literally be their licence to do business and their licence to operate. It is not a nice cherry on the cake or just a nice thing to have.

The fact that the sustainability manager and the buying manager often run in parallel in such companies, rather than the buying manager’s work feeding into the sustainability manager’s, is a problem. The cost per garment is put against the environmental and social cost per garment, and the financial cost always wins out. We need to change that relationship.

I agree with my hon. Friend that, through our clothes, we are wearing the fresh water supplies of people in India and in Uzbekistan, and we are destroying the environment. We have heard about the drying up of the Aral sea in Uzbekistan, where cotton farming has contributed to an economic, social and environmental disaster. We have not made our final recommendations, but I promise him that, when we do, they will be pretty far-reaching.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The hon. Lady makes the point that considerations about the fashion industry relate not just to economic conditions but social conditions around the world, so I am sure she would agree that it is in everyone’s interest not just to buy from the highest ethical producers, but from British companies too. Will she take this opportunity to confirm to the House that the first evidence session at the Victoria and Albert Museum was the highest attended public session of this Parliament? I had some scepticism about this inquiry at the beginning, but the number of people interested in it has convinced me. To confirm what my right hon. Friend said, Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) says, we will not allow the report to gather dust. There is a great deal of interest in it out in the country.

Mary Creagh: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is a passionate and committed member of the Committee. We were thrilled to be hosted by the V&A. Its amazing “Fashioned from Nature” exhibition contains earrings made out of little birds 150 years ago, showing how we have consistently stolen from nature to decorate ourselves. There is nothing new under the sun.

The hon. Gentleman is right about our very large committee hearing. We are breaking all sorts of new bounds with this Committee. When we launch the report we are going to have some cartoons to accompany it. I think that will be a first for Parliament, too. As the right hon. Member for Wantage says, the real value of a garment comes not in its price but in the number of times it is worn. That is where we get real value. A £50 garment worn 100 times is better than a £5 dress that is worn just once.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, our Committee Chair, for her foresight in bringing this inquiry forward at this time. It is absolutely the right time. Does she agree that it is shameful that one of the top 10 fashion retailers in this country, Kurt Geiger, refused point blank to provide evidence to our Committee? It must come forward with evidence before we get to the final report.
Mary Creagh: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend, who is also an enthusiastic participant in this inquiry. I had to do a bit of convincing, but this has been quite a revelation for us as a Committee. To have a nil response from Kurt Geiger is extraordinary. It is not too late for it to give us its response. I hope it will listen—its public relations firm is probably writing it a desperate note at the moment—and I hope its chief executive will take this issue on board. I will make one other point to the House. This House passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015. It is not clear to me which brands have or have not submitted modern slavery statements. I hope journalists listening to this debate do their own research into that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Trying to make ethical choices as a consumer can be really difficult, whether for food or fashion. I must admit that after sitting through one session I came to the conclusion that we would all be walking around in brown paper bags—recycled paper, of course—because there seems to be a problem with almost every type of clothing. Does the Chair of the Committee agree that the onus cannot just be on the consumer to shop around? We must require manufacturers and retailers to step up to the mark and make sure that what they put on the market is ethically sourced, whether it be in terms of labour, materials or the way they treat their workers and so on.

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and for her incredibly dedicated leadership in the Committee, particularly on food waste on which she is a real national expert. She is right that it is impossible for the consumer to pick their way through this situation. The supply chains need to be guaranteed by retailers right down to farm level. That is very difficult because cotton is a global commodity. We heard that some retailers are attempting to do that by working with small-scale cotton traders. We live in a digital world where we have blockchain sustainability and sourcing. Some supermarkets can tell us more about the sourcing in their sausage supply chain—the factories and the abattoirs where their animals were killed—than they can about the lives of the women and in some cases the children working in factories. The International Labour Organisation definition of a child is someone under 15. There are 15 and 16-year-olds working in factories. The problem with the current model is that the onus cannot just be on the consumer to shop around. We must require manufacturers and retailers to step up to the mark and make sure that what they put on the market is ethically sourced, whether it be in terms of labour, materials or the way they treat their workers and so on.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady and the Select Committee for an excellent interim report. As chair of the all-party group on textiles and fashion, we welcome the report. We recently held a roundtable to look at this very issue and were shocked to hear evidence from Boohoo about its £5 dress, which stated that workers in factories in the UK are making seven or eight dresses an hour. I remember when I was doing textiles at school it took me about four weeks to make my skirt. Sadly, someone sold it at Bishop Ullathorne school so I never got to wear it. It was fantastic and it was going to look really good. That was my one chance to make my own garment. The point is that very skilled workers in factories are working really hard, but I do wonder when they are able to make a cup of tea or go for a loo break. In the UK, they are making seven or eight dresses an hour that are being sold for a fiver. That still raises too many questions.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Committee on this excellent report. Following on from the answer the Chair gave to the previous question, I was struck by the evidence on minimum wage transgressions given to the Committee by the Financial Times journalist. She said: “it is a totally open secret. Central government knows about it; local government knows about it. All of the retailers know about it.” It is very clear and stark that there is a blatant disregard for the law. I am mystified as to why that has not been put a stop to already.
Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. Sarah O’Connor’s testimony was literally jawdropping; we could not quite believe that that was happening in this country. After her testimony, more and more whistleblowers, who wished to preserve their anonymity, came to us to talk about what they had seen. They said that rivers in India are running blue from the dyes from cotton factories.

Sir David Metcalfe said that the textile industry is a problem area in the UK for national minimum wage enforcement. In Leicester, there were raids on 28 factories—the raids are based on risk. Of those 28 factories, 14 are now under investigation. We think that that is for non-payment of the national minimum wage, but two are under investigation for other reasons—we can guess that that is either for gangmaster issues or immigration issues. That shows the scale of the problem in these high-risk industries. We have shone a very bright light on Leicester, and we will continue to do so.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I appreciate the work of the Select Committee Chair and its members. When I was a Back-Bencher, I worked with the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on the all-party parliamentary group on textile and fashion. I was also on the APPG on ethics and sustainability in fashion, and we had a swishing party in the House of Lords. Sustainable fashion is therefore of interest to me.

I am here on behalf of the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, who is currently at a roundtable, but I undertake to have a look at this very interesting report. It will go before Ministers in my Department, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, so this important work can be taken forward.

Backbench Business

Equitable Life

12.31 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the Government’s acceptance in full of the Parliamentary Ombudsman’s findings in relation to its maladministration with regard to Equitable Life; notes that the Parliamentary Ombudsman recommended that policy holders should be put back in the position they would have been had maladministration not occurred; further notes that the overwhelming majority of victims have only received partial compensation compared to the confirmed losses directly attributed to regulatory failures; and calls on the Government to make a commitment to provide full compensation to victims of the scandal with the end of austerity now in sight.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to have this debate, and the Government for finally allowing us to have some time in the Chamber to debate the issues that the Backbench Business Committee wishes to put forward. I declare an interest as co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders. I have held that office ever since I was elected to Parliament in May 2010. I will set out the history of the scandal, the Government’s position to date, the current position on compensation, and what we want on behalf of the victims of the scandal. It is worth recalling that this was a Ponzi scheme. Equitable Life encouraged people to move their life savings into unsustainable pension funds by promising bonuses that could not be delivered. It also paid commission to agents to encourage people to move their savings into these scandalous positions. Ponzi schemes are all very well when money is coming in, but eventually money must be paid out. If the amount of money coming in is unsustainable, the bonuses that are promised to savers cannot be paid.

After almost a decade of operating the scheme, Equitable Life started legal action in 1999 to try to reduce the bonuses; it was unsuccessful in that regard. It then tried to sue its auditors for failing to point out the errors in its scheme. It was unsuccessful in that enterprise, too, and had to pay out more than £30 million in court costs. All that money could have been used to compensate the victims of the scam.

Eventually, the parliamentary ombudsman intervened and took up the case. Her recommendations said that this was the most serious case of maladministration she had ever encountered, and that the people involved were the Government, the regulators and Equitable Life. That is what makes this case unique.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a compelling speech. He is right that the situation has been ongoing for a very long time. The parliamentary ombudsman said—I have read some articles on this today—that people still have not yet been fully compensated, and some of them have actually died. We have raised this issue time and time again over the years. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who will speak shortly, has done a hell of a lot of good work on this. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing the debate.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I have no doubt that the co-chairman of the APPG, the hon. Member for Leeds North East
(Fabian Hamilton), will make a substantial contribution to this debate. He has been involved in this for more years than he probably cares to remember.

The previous Government promised some degree of compensation to the victims of this horrible scandal. I was a candidate at the 2010 general election, and in the run-up to it, the only pledge that Conservative campaign headquarters asked me to sign was that we would give full compensation to the victims of the Equitable Life scandal. I regard that pledge, which I signed, as one to the electorate and it is something I will honour. I believe that the Conservative party should honour it in full, and I welcome anyone else who will join me.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all his hard work and persistence on the issue over many years. A number of my constituents, like his, have been affected by the scandal, but have received merely a fraction of what they are due and what the parliamentary ombudsman ruled they should receive. The Treasury’s reason for that was pressure on the public finances, but now that the public finances are in a better place, does my hon. Friend agree that it is now time to compensate the victims of this scandal properly?

**Bob Blackman**: I completely agree, and I will come on to our asks in a few minutes.

When we were elected in 2010 and the coalition Government came to the fore, that Government took action, as is acknowledged in the motion, and I was pleased that they did so. The piece of legislation to provide compensation was almost the first to be put through the House after the election.

**James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The Government did take some action. My constituents Jean Cooper, Ron Moseley and Tom Graham—Equitable Life victims who have done a lot of work campaigning—have made lots of representations to me. Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the improving public finances, the Government should take on board the argument for full compensation, perhaps phased over time?

**Bob Blackman**: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Conveniently, he leads me to my next point.

In the comprehensive spending review on 20 October 2010, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne—I do not always agree with him these days, but I certainly did at the time—remarked, in relation to Sir John Chadwick’s report:

“We accept the findings of the parliamentary ombudsman in full.”—[Official Report, 20 October 2010; Vol. 516, c. 960.]

He did not say “partially”; it was not hedged in any way. He went on to talk about the relative losses and the amount of money, and said that the fair amount of funding at the time was £1.5 billion because of the state of the public finances.

In the financial statement on 20 March 2013, George Osborne went further and said that compensation should be provided to people who were not covered by the law—namely, the pre-’92 trapped annuitants. He said:

“We are not doing this because we are legally obliged to; we are doing it because, quite simply, it is the right thing to do.”—[Official Report, 20 March 2013; Vol. 500, c. 941.]

I agree completely.

In the financial statement on 8 July 2015, George Osborne stated:

“We are also going to use the remaining funds available in our Equitable Life payment scheme, as it closes, to double the support that we give to those policyholders on pension credit who need this extra help most.”—[Official Report, 8 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 333.]

**Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that not only is it the right thing to do for these victims, but it is the right thing to do to show faith and confidence in the system and for all those who want to provide for themselves in old age? Over 2,000 of my constituents were affected by this.

**Bob Blackman**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a debt of honour, and we owe it to those victims who did the right thing. They saved for their old age and now they suffer consequences.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Treasury was owed money by other people its attitude would be very different? It is amazing what the Government can find money for when it needs to. As my hon. Friend said, this is a pledge that this party has made over many years, and I support him in the campaign he has superbly led over many years. Does he agree that the Treasury should now do the right thing, as they promised to do all those years ago, as he has pointed out?

**Bob Blackman**: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am not a Treasury Minister, so unfortunately I am not in a position to honour that pledge, but I look forward to my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary giving us some good news this afternoon.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend, particularly in helping all my constituents. Does he agree that the failure to pay these moneys out over the last couple of years, particularly at the time of the financial crash when the banks and building societies were bailed out, sends out the terrible message that we will look after corporations, but we do not look after our constituents?

**Bob Blackman**: That is a serious point. During the financial crash, the view was taken that we could not afford or allow a situation in which the banks and other institutions failed. Indeed, the position of the Government subsequently has been that Equitable Life was too big an organisation to allow to fail. Had it failed when it was basically trading insolvently, the Government would have needed to pick up the total cost for all those victims of the scandal.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) on the work that they do in the all-party parliamentary group, of which I am a member. Today provides a perfect example of how political will can transmit into effective action. We have read the stories about MPs being offered resources for their constituencies to support the withdrawal agreement; does that not show that when there is the political will, the money can be found?
Bob Blackman: Thus far my constituency has not been offered any additional funds for my voting for anything—that is not the basis on which I vote in this House—but I can understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Many of my constituents who have been affected by the Equitable Life issue regard the APPG as their only voice in not only this place, but the country. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the failure to compensate the Equitable Life victims not only has a hugely detrimental effect on their lives, with their not be able to retire in the comfort that they deserve, as they thought they would, but also affects faith in this House and in the pensions system at a time when people are living longer and need to be doing more to prepare for retirement?

Bob Blackman: It is clearly a view that people are not saving in the way in which they used to. Young people are being discouraged from saving as a result of what they see as the scandals that took place.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I join others in commending my hon. Friend on the extraordinary campaign that he has led. Does he agree that not only is this a debt of honour, but that the Treasury can take comfort from the unique circumstances of the case in terms of the fault that was found with the Government and other regulators to know that this would not open the floodgates? The matter stands on its own terms, and the Government can do the proper thing of compensating people without fearing that that will have some enormous knock-on effect.

Bob Blackman: Not only that, but if the compensation was paid out, because the people involved are vulnerable and retired or likely to retire soon, the Treasury would see the money repaid and put into the economy straightaway, not put away for a rainy day.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that in addition to the financial benefits the Treasury would draw from money recirculating, doing such a thing would also mean that those former policyholders who are now having to look to other financial instruments to raise cash—such as equity release, which is equally inappropriate for them—would be protected from having to undertake other risky financial measures to sustain themselves in their old age?

Bob Blackman: I completely agree with the hon. Lady; she makes a valid point.

Several hon. Members rose—

Bob Blackman: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson).

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): One of the issues that has affected people in my constituency—they are really concerned—is the fact that they expected this to be dealt with. They trusted the Government to do so, and they are very suspicious and cynical about the delay. We need reassurances that the Government truly understand the impact that this is having on people’s lives.

Bob Blackman: Clearly there is a debt of honour, and we need to make sure the people who have been victims are properly compensated.

Mrs Keni Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way one more time?

Bob Blackman: Given that my hon. Friend has been sitting beside me, I will give way to her before I move on.

Mrs Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend; he has been exceedingly generous in giving way.

I can only echo the many points that Members on both sides of the House have made about this issue. Many of my constituents have written the most heart-breaking stories about how their lives were destroyed by this scandal. What is my hon. Friend’s view of the fact that no one has been prosecuted or sent to prison for this scandal?
Bob Blackman: That is clearly a matter for court action—for the Crown Prosecution Service and others—but it is a further scandal that no one has suffered anything other than the people who saved the money in the first place.

May I set out for the House’s benefit the categories of individuals who suffered the unfortunate loss? First, there are the pre-’92 trapped annuitants. Bizarrely—I have never understood this—the Government drew a line at 1 September 1992 for the people who would receive compensation. Those who invested before 1 September 1992 were excluded from the compensation scheme, yet they are the most elderly and often the most vulnerable individuals who are owed money. Someone who took out a pension policy on 31 August 1992 got not a penny, but those who took a policy out on 1 September 1992 could end up with full compensation. That seems completely arbitrary. Many of these people are particularly vulnerable. Some 9,200 of those individuals are still alive and it is clear that they should receive full compensation.

The cost of providing full compensation for those victims will be less than £100 million. The key point is that within the compensation scheme, there is a contingency, and that does not need to be used now because the forecasts are that the payment for those who were receiving 100% benefit will be 11% down, so the additional funds and the contingency are not required. The Government could therefore take the decision to pay in full those most elderly victims who need assistance.

Post-’92, there are of course two categories: those who received 100% compensation; and those who have received 22.4% compensation. Why 22.4%? That is an arbitrary figure. I believe that every victim of this scandal should receive the full amount of money.

In the various statements that were made to the different Select Committees and to this House, the Government accepted that the total bill would be £4.3 billion. That figure was later corrected to £4.1 billion. However, the Government have allocated only £1.5 billion. They clearly have a debt of honour, and I have three basic asks for them today. First, given the position of the pre-1992 trapped annuitants and the figures that I have set out, will the Government now take action to compensate fully those elderly individuals who are extremely frail? The money will almost certainly go straight back into the Treasury and the economy in a way that we would all welcome.

Secondly, will the Government face up to the fact that although the scheme is closed to new entrants, they are going to be paying out to the victims of the scandal for some considerable time? Will they therefore top up that money, possibly over a phased period, as has been suggested? Perhaps that period could be five years. Most of those victims will be coming up to retirement soon, and they need certainty that they are going to get some money. The key point here is that this would not immediately cost the Treasury the £2.6 billion that would be required, because this could be phased over a longer period to top up the pension schemes of those in operation.

My third ask, which is equally crucial, relates to the fact that the Government now know exactly who is involved, because the scheme is closed to new entrants. They know the names, the addresses, the national insurance numbers and the total amount that those people are owed, and that data needs to be retained. I ask the Minister to give a guarantee that data will be retained and not destroyed, so that when the Treasury eventually owns up to this and accepts that it has to pay full compensation, we do not have to go back to square one to get all the data back.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Order. I suggest that Members take up to 10 minutes, and we will start with Fabian Hamilton.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to my all-party parliamentary group co-chair, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has given an excellent introduction and who has worked very hard indeed in the nine years that he has been in the House to try to bring about the justice that we all want for the victims of the Equitable Life scandal. I am sad that, after so many years of debating the issue, we are back here again today talking about the continuing losses suffered by hundreds of thousands of Equitable Life policyholders. They invested in the world’s oldest life assurance company in the belief that they would be able to live a comfortable old age, but instead, after a lifetime of saving, they find themselves sometimes destitute and often much poorer through no fault of their own.
How have we arrived here, nearly 20 years after Equitable Life closed its doors to new investors and nine years after the Government promised to ensure that the losses incurred by Equitable Life policyholders would be fully compensated? I hope that hon. Members will permit me briefly to go back over some of the history of this sorry tale in order to give the House and the public some answers to these questions. My first involvement in the Equitable Life saga was to speak in a Westminster Hall debate that I led on 24 June 2009. In that debate, I spoke about the serious issues facing so many of our constituents since the crash of Equitable Life following its inability to meet obligations and promises made to investors over decades.

In July 2008, the parliamentary ombudsman published her first report on Equitable Life, entitled “Equitable Life: a decade of regulatory failure”. On 11 December that year, the Public Administration Committee produced a report entitled “Justice delayed”, in which it stated:

“Over the last eight years many of those members and their families have suffered great anxiety as policy values were cut and pension payments reduced. Many are no longer alive, and will be unable to benefit personally from any compensation.”

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I should like to thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for making that case for Equitable Life members. I should also like to pay tribute to my constituents, Ray and Marjorie Dunn, who have been brilliant campaigners for the Equitable Members Action Group. They have made these exact points: this has been going on for a very long time, and many pensioners are now well into their retirement and living in pensioner poverty because the Government have only partially compensated them. Is it not time for the Government to make up for their past mistakes?

Fabian Hamilton: Yes, indeed. I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for making that point. I know Ray and Marjorie Dunn very well—they correspond with me regularly—and I know that my hon. Friend has been a champion of their case and of many other cases in his constituency. I will go on to say a bit more about how I think they should be compensated.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Would my hon. Friend accept that one of the biggest problems is that we have had so many investigations into Equitable Life, and that it was not helpful that the previous Government did not accept the case of the financial ombudsman, right at the beginning? There was a lot of, dare I say, confusion and deliberate misleading, but that report was very clear on where the blame should lie. This has not helped the case of the Equitable Life fundholders.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. The ombudsman’s report did indeed make it clear that this was a catastrophic failure of regulation, and that the Government bore considerable responsibility for compensating those who had lost out. I will go on to say more about that in a minute.

The Public Administration Committee also stated:

“We share both a deep sense of frustration and continuing outrage that the situation has remained unresolved for so long.”

That was more than 10 years ago. On 5 May 2009, Ann Abraham, the then parliamentary ombudsman, published a second report, “Injustice unremedied: the Government’s response on Equitable Life”, in which she stated:

“I was deeply disappointed that the Government chose to reject many of the findings that I had made, when I was acting independently on behalf of Parliament and after a detailed and exhaustive investigation.”

She concluded:

“In this case, I am satisfied that the injustice I found in my report to have resulted from maladministration on the part of the public bodies responsible for the prudential regulation of the Society has not so far been remedied.”

There was certainly no shortage of reports—just a shortage of justice for those who had, through no fault of their own, suffered huge losses in the life savings they had accrued over years of hard work.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his co-chair on pursuing this issue so assiduously. As he says, the difficulty is that there have been so many reports. I have one constituent who is 84 and whose wife died three weeks ago. I have another who is 80 and who has just been diagnosed with dementia. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those constituents need to know today that they will be compensated fully and soon, before they suffer further bereavement or illness?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for that intervention. The story of her constituents is reflected up and down the country, in every constituency represented in this House, and I hope that we will get some answers from the Minister at the end of this debate.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the approach being taken seems inconsistent with the approaches taken in different contexts? For example, if someone is the victim of a crime, they can be compensated by the state for something that is not the state’s fault at all, and yet the state is more reluctant in circumstances where there was complicity, or certainly fault, from the state. Does he agree that is a troubling inconsistency?

Fabian Hamilton: Indeed, and if I am able to complete my contribution this afternoon, I will add to the hon. Gentleman’s point.

At the core of the problem is the fact that Equitable Life simply could not meet the obligations that it had made for itself, because it had made no provision for guarantees against low interest rates on policies issued before 1988. It declared bonuses out of all proportion to its profits and, indeed, its assets. Following the House of Lords ruling in July 2000, the society stopped taking new business in December that year, which effectively spelled the end for Equitable Life. More than 1 million policyholders were then found that they faced cuts to their bonuses and annuities, which caused a huge loss of income on which many small investors had depended. After all, the average investment for the 500,000 individual policyholders was just £45,000, which, according to EMAG, even at its height would have yielded no more than £300 a month.

The then Labour Government unfortunately failed to introduce any ex gratia compensation scheme and refused to follow the recommendations of the parliamentary
ombudsman. Reacting to the Government’s lack of response to the ombudsman’s report, the then Conservative Opposition stated their determination to introduce an Equitable Life (Payments) Bill early in the next Parliament should they form a Government after the forthcoming general election of 2010.

One of the coalition agreement’s plans for legislation did indeed include such a Bill, which became the Equitable Life (Payments) Act 2010. It was introduced early on in June 2010, shortly after the new Government took office. On 10 November, I tabled an amendment to the Bill in Committee that would have included the pre-1992 trapped with-profits annuitants—WPAs—who had been specifically excluded, as the hon. Member for Harrow East said earlier, from the proposed compensation scheme. The Bill offered 100% compensation to all with-profits annuitants who took out their annuities after 1 September 1992, and 22.4% to every other policyholder. Many right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House felt that that was inherently unfair, because the 1 September 1992 date was somewhat arbitrary. Many of the policyholders would unfortunately not even live to enjoy the compensation were it to be paid.

I tabled another amendment to that Bill, which read:

“Payments authorised by the Treasury under this section to with-profits annuitants shall be made without regard to the date on which such policies were taken out”.

The amendment took just over two hours to debate and the vote was lost by 76 to 301, but it strongly set out the case for including the pre-1992 with-profits annuitants. Although that amendment failed in 2010, I still believe that it is vital to give equality of treatment to those who took out with-profits annuitant contracts before 1992 and who are still alive. As we have heard, those people are the oldest and the most vulnerable victims, and the cost could be met from the £140 million underspent from the £1.5 billion originally allocated by Parliament.

Rectifying the injustice would cost in the region of around £100 million. The lifetime payments to the post-1992 WPAs are 11% less than forecast, and there is no reason to expect that the total amount of £620 million allocated for those payments will ever be needed, let alone exceeded. That means that the separate contingency fund should now be released and distributed to victims, rather than remain in Her Majesty’s Treasury’s back pocket. Will the Minister confirm this afternoon that every last penny of the £1.5 billion already allocated by Parliament will reach victims as intended?

The Bill received Royal Assent in 2010, and the compensation scheme was set in motion. It was slow at first, but it began to pick up over subsequent years. By 31 August 2016, when the scheme’s final figures were published, over £1.2 billion had been paid out to 932,805 policyholders, although more than 107,647 have still to be paid but cannot be traced. Tragically, 15,516 policyholders have died, and their estates did not claim the payments despite attempts by the scheme to contact them. In addition, 894,507 non-with-profits annuity investors have been issued with lump sum payments totalling £751 million.

To conclude, when we examine the compensation paid to investors following the collapse of the Icelandic banks in 2008, for which every investor received up to £50,000 of their losses in full and quickly, the Equitable Life scheme looks rather less generous. Given that the average policy involved a total sum invested of £45,000, it seems rather unfair to me and to Equitable Life policyholders that they did not receive more, which is why EMAG continues to campaign for full compensation for all policyholders and why so many Members on both sides of this House support that view. I urge all Members—this is the last bit, Mr Deputy Speaker—current and future to take up the cause of Equitable Life policyholders to try to restore their faith in the ability of this House, as the elected representatives of the people, properly to secure compensation for the victims of one of the greatest financial scandals of our age. We have a moral duty and should not be afraid to carry it out.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am not going to complain about the length of that speech, but if Members can try to speak for under 10 minutes, that would help the situation. All our constituents need the help and support of this House, and we need to hear these passionate speeches, but please try to help each other. The good news is that Sir Desmond Swayne has offered to undershush in order to pull some time back.

1.6 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), to whom the House owes an enormous debt for the amount of time, effort and initiative that they have put into raising the profile of this important issue.

Ever since I have been in this House, I have experienced legislation after legislation and Government initiative after Government initiative to try to deal with the enormous implications of the problem we face as we spend an increasing amount of our lives in retirement. We cannot expect people to rely on the basic state pension. It was never designed to provide people with the level of comfort to which they had grown accustomed during their working lives. It was introduced to prevent people from falling into poverty, not to provide them with comfort. It was introduced to keep the wolf from the door. Notwithstanding the huge improvements that we have made, such as the legislative changes with respect to women’s entitlement and the operation of the triple lock, people imagine that they have paid for their state pension, but they have not. They have paid for those who are retired now, as they expect this inter-generational contract to proceed and that others will pay for them.

However, as the working population shrinks relative to the retired population, people must make savings for their retirement. We have this enormous task of public policy to get that message across to people and, hey, pensions are complicated and people have busy lives. They have children at school, mortgages to pay and job worries. Pensions are a low priority for them. I never cease to be amazed at the level of public ignorance and, indeed, indifference to knowledge about pensions—even in this House. Mr Deputy Speaker, you may be aware that the House authorities are providing seminars for Members who are approaching retirement, at which they suddenly discover the implications of the lifetime...
They should just look at the disproportionate pressure, they maintained it as a priority. Let us be honest that previously, when money was easy, nothing had been done. However, that was then and this is now, and it cannot go away—22.4% is not a settlement that can address the needs of those who are required to be compensated. We need to get the message out there that people will be protected if they do the right thing and save.

I have heard it said that Ministers sometimes ask whether, if they had a couple of billion to spend, this would be the way to spend it, given all the demands on the public purse. Yes, it would be. First, because of the public policy priority to which I have drawn attention and, secondly, because this is a matter of moral rectitude. The Treasury was aware of what was going on at Equitable Life, and therefore something must be done to compensate these people.

Ministers can be proud of the fact that, when they came to power in 2010 and sought to address this issue at a time when the public finances were under such pressure, they maintained it as a priority. Let us be honest that previously, when money was easy, nothing had been done. However, that was then and this is now, and it cannot go away—22.4% is not a settlement that can address the needs of those who are required to be compensated. We need to get the message out there that people will be protected if they do the right thing and save.

I make no apology for repeating some of what has already been said, and I am sure others will do the same. It is a disgrace that there are over 1 million victims of this pensions scandal. It is even more disgraceful that it is 11 years since the ombudsman said that victims had lost their pensions because of a decade of serious serial regulatory maladministration, and it is a total disgrace that, despite the Treasury admitting it had blame for the scandal, these policyholders still have not been compensated in full.

The north-east regional branch of EMAG has advised me that there are over 2,000 victims of this scandal in North Tyneside. In recent years I have been contacted by several constituents who are rightly aggrieved because they have received only just over 22% of their pension pot. One constituent is in the group of around 8,500 people who are considered the oldest and most vulnerable—the pre-1992 policyholders—and who have been treated less favourably than those who bought their annuities later. I spoke to him yesterday, ahead of this debate, and he pointed out that, sadly, a number of these annuitants are no longer with us, as other colleagues have also mentioned. He is particularly concerned that the Government keep safe the data relating to Equitable Life annuitants until the money is available to recompense those who have lost out. I hope the Minister will reassure my constituent on that request today.

My constituent is, of course, correct in pointing out that some victims will never see justice done. No one is getting any younger, and it is heartbreaking that thousands upon thousands of Equitable Life victims, through no fault of their own, have been left without the security they thought they had wisely invested in for their old age.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I am one of the 2017 intake who have been contacted by constituents affected by this. Does my hon. Friend agree that, if we want people to save for their future through a pension, we have to put right the wrongs that have been done? Modest people who saved well for their pension have now lost out in their old age.

Mary Glindon: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, which I will be addressing later.

It is frustrating for us to know that justice has not been done, but how much worse must be the anger and frustration of those who feel cheated? Today’s motion specifically calls upon the Government to make a commitment to provide full compensation to victims of the scandal, with the end of austerity now in sight. EMAG’s demands have been put forward reasonably. As the Chancellor announced in the Budget that austerity is over, it seems that the statement by one of the Minister’s predecessors, following a meeting with an APPG delegation two years ago, that the demands—the payment scheme funding for the pre-1992 annuitants and the £2.6 billion funding to recompense fully the 895,000 victims—could not be met because of public purse constraints, even if they were spread over a period, and because it would run contrary to the Government’s efforts to restore sustainability to the public finances, is no longer applicable. That has been mentioned by previous speakers, and I think the Minister will hear it again.

Paying these victims what they are owed will not only be doing what is right but will send out the message that people can and should save for their retirement, in the knowledge that the Government will protect them if such a scandal, heaven forbid, were ever to happen again. I hope the Minister will be able to assure Members present that the Equitable Life victims we represent are no longer subject to the constraints of austerity. It is shameful that the years of austerity were ever used as an excuse for the Government to deny their responsibility for paying these pensioners and future pensioners their entitlement.

My message to the Minister and the whole Treasury is that, in these times of trouble and uncertainty, they should take the opportunity to restore some faith in the Government and our Parliament by, at last, paying the Equitable Life policyholders their rightful due.
Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton). I hope they will take it in the right way when I say that their continued presence here after a decade gives me an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. Having spent a couple of years penance on the Front Bench, I come back to find that, despite their sterling efforts, the issue is still before us.

The Equitable Life scandal is one of the greatest failures, perhaps the greatest failure, of public oversight and regulation in modern times, so it was the right decision to act in 2010. But, sadly, to act only partially was a failure of moral leadership, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) intimated.

The ombudsman’s report in 2008 was unambiguous, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East said, in calling for all those affected by injustice and maladministration from 1990 onwards to receive full compensation. The chairman of Equitable Life himself said that the report was inarguable. The report made no distinction between post-1992 and pre-1992 investors, and nor did anyone else—not the victims, not Equitable Life, not the ombudsman and not the Public Administration Committee. The Government’s rationale was that people who invested before 1992 were not affected by the scandal. Well, I am afraid that I completely disagree. These were long-term investors who were affected by ongoing and long-running maladministration. They were affected by the continuing failings of both Equitable Life and the regulators. Moreover, as we have heard, nearly all the pre-1992 cases involved some of the oldest and most vulnerable victims—they were also probably the poorest—who have so far received only a paltry sum of money. If the state fails to regulate properly, it inevitably forces that cost on to the consumer, and it is incumbent on the Government to make that right—and make it right in full.

The ombudsman was clear that there were fundamental failings by the then Department of Trade and Industry, the Government Actuary’s Department and the Financial Services Authority. The truth is that they knew, for most of the time, that this was a fraudulent Ponzi scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has described it as such and we should understand that Ponzi schemes are frauds—it is straightforward and simple. The Government failed to ensure that accurate returns were in the public domain; they failed to take ample opportunities to step in; and they failed to use their full range of powers. So, frankly, it seems to me that the Treasury plucked a cut-off date from thin air—there is no other way of describing it.

The ombudsman called on the Government to compensate the victims fully: to put them in the position they would have been in if the scandal had not occurred. That is the test: where would they have been if this scandal had not occurred? Leaving aside the pre-’92 victims, that is a far cry from the 22p in the pound that has, in effect, been paid to many of those whom we have chosen to compensate. As has been said, this ultimately comes down to an issue of public trust. These victims were not wealthy investors. Typically, in my constituency at least, they were retired factory workers, teachers, nurses and small businessmen, who believed they were setting themselves up for at least a tolerable and reasonable retirement—I was tempted to say a comfortable one. That is a perfectly honourable, reasonable and laudable ambition for all our citizens.

As my hon. Friend made clear, the Conservative party promised in our 2010 manifesto to compensate the victims—not partially compensate them or compensate some, but compensate them. Like him, I was a signatory to that—indeed, I was heavily involved in getting it to happen. So I feel personally committed to it, too. It was right there in black and white, and it is there with my signature on it, just like everybody else’s. A failure to right this wrong will only serve to further undermine the public’s trust in politics and financial institutions.

The Government say, or said then, that this comes down to an issue of “affordability”, but affordability is always a decision of priority: what comes first? The Government did not say that they did not have any money—they said they did not have enough money. What is more important than this: keeping our word, supporting the poor, upholding an institution that is important to people in the future, as well as these victims? All those things make this issue incredibly important. So in my view the affordability argument was flawed in the first place, but that was the position. Now, even that falls down, because we are supposedly, as the Prime Minister tells us, at the end of the era of austerity—good. That should be good for every citizen, but it should be good first and foremost for those who have done the right thing, for those who have looked after themselves and for those who reasonably could have expected the Government to protect them.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Davis: Sorry, but I am finishing on this point. I am pleased to say that I am back in the fray, on the Back Benches, and I hope that we can quickly slay this dragon, once and for all.

1.23 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I join in congratulating the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and his co-chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who spoke earlier, on bringing this debate to the House today. I commend them for their longevity in this process, because this has been the “Bleak House” of the bleak house of scandals. I cannot remember how many people from the beginning of Charles Dickens’s novel were still alive at the end, but this makes the point sharply.

I, too, think about all those people who have lost money in this process, with more than 2,000 of them in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said that she had had a modest plan with Equitable Life, and so did I, probably along with lots of people in this House. But it is the people we have heard about this afternoon—those who thought this was a safety net, not a passport to riches or even comfortableness, in some cases—who have missed out and been let down. We have heard of the sorts of people that group included. I am not going to go through the whole list, but I do wish to pick up on the reference to small business owners and the self-employed, because this is a specific and important issue for my constituents.
In my constituency, we still have more than 400 guesthouses, bed and breakfasts, holiday flats, people in the visitor economy and hoteliers. We are talking about precisely the sort of people who would want to put money into a company like Equitable Life when times gave them a little extra money. Why shouldn’t they? After all, one could look at the nice little crest on the front and everything else. This was a company founded, I believe, in 1759. I am told by the briefing from EMAG—I did not know this before today—that even Coleridge and Wordsworth were early investors in it. For someone looking for something that might do what it said on the tin, this was the sort of company to go for, but, sadly, as we have heard, that was not the case, so many of these people have missed out—the people who did that sort of thing.

Over the years, I have had dozens of people come to my surgeries who wanted to retire from their hotel or small business background but simply did not have the money to do so. Inevitably, that was not to do with Equitable Life for all of them. One of these people has written to me saying:

“I came to Blackpool 17 years ago with my wife and granddaughter to open and run a new Care home for mental health rehabilitation...For health reasons (and I was well past retirement age) we had to close the business...I really would appreciate any input you could bring to the debate”

with my example.

He continues:

“It would change our lives from having no spare money whatsoever every month. I suffered a seizure 7 weeks ago and am no longer allowed to drive. My wife is suffering from acute nerve pain...and is on morphine.”

Another constituent wrote to me saying:

“In my own case, my losses...were £28,942.

I received a payment of £6,483.

This means that the money I am still owed amounts to £22,459...The token 22.4% payment is a good start but does not solve the drastic depletion of my retirement funds...A debt is a debt and if the government sidesteps every obligation by claiming unaffordability there would never be any public expenditure. The government regularly chooses where and when to shake the magic money tree.”

I absolutely concur with my constituent’s indignation in that area.

I also want to pay tribute to the local co-ordinators, who have worked hard to identify those involved and keep their spirits up. The Blackpool South EMAG co-ordinator, Mr William Fray, has written to me to ask me to press these points today.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend makes a point of which everybody in the House will be cognisant. It is important to recognise the people who, totally off their own bat, giving their time and, in some cases, at their own expense, have taken this process forward.

I am not going to repeat the sorry history of the comings and goings and everything else. It is true that the coalition Government did accept the ombudsman’s report, but neither they, nor their successors, including the current Government, have complied properly or fully with the ombudsman’s judgment. I have been in this place for a long time, under Governments of all persuasions, and one develops a certain amount of cynicism as to when the shredder comes out. It is really important that the Minister guarantees today, in plain English, that the Government and their relevant agencies will retain the necessary data indefinitely. I would not like people to come back to the House in three or four years’ time only to be told, “I’m terribly sorry, we thought we had the data but somehow it got shredded.”

The Government have sold their interest in Lloyds and are reducing their stake in RBS, as we have heard. It would be fitting to use a small portion of the money recouped finally to settle the acknowledged debt to Equitable Life victims. From what we have heard today, it is absolutely clear to me that we need to deal with the people in an annuity situation. It is important that the Treasury does not leave money in its back pocket. It has great form in this area: I know from my Front-Bench role about the advanced learning loan money, only half of which has been spent by the Department for Education, with the other half now sitting in the Treasury’s back pocket, to use the expression we heard earlier. One wonders what “affordability” means, and whether it is simply a case of the Government waiting for many of the people affected to become too enfeebled or no longer able to press their views. This issue is not only terribly morally, but foolish practically, because of the negative vibes it sends out.

Let me give the House an anecdote from many years ago, when I worked as a public affairs consultant for a number of clients. As part of the process, we very often employed self-employed people—perhaps journalists doing a public awareness campaign—or small businesses. I was relatively young at the time, so it took quite a bit of pluck to go and talk to our director of finance, but I had a distinguished medical journalist who had not been paid for ages for doing these public things for my clients. I went along and explained the situation, and I was told, “Well, we pay large businesses within around 30 to 40 days, we pay smaller suppliers within 60 to 90 days, and we pay self-employed people when we feel like it.” I am not casting aspersions on any particular Minister, but for many of the people affected by this, it must feel like that is the case now.

I concur absolutely with the three demands made by the hon. Member for Harrow East at the beginning. Pensioner poverty is a key issue for so many of my constituents in Blackpool South, for a whole range of reasons, and for those in many other parts of the country, too. If we make progress in this area, those people will at least receive some of that safety net comfort that they should have had a long time ago.
1.33 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden). His description of the type of person affected by this scandal is very apt and applies throughout every constituency. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this important debate and thank him for all the hard work that he has put in over many years on behalf of the victims, and I thank every other member of the all-party group.

This debate gives me the opportunity to speak on behalf of the 1,400 Equitable Life policyholders and their dependants living in Erewash. There seem to be fewer than the number living in some other constituencies, but that number is still significant. The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) said that she might repeat some of the things said by other Members; I will as well, and I will not apologise for it, because it is important that we are united on this issue, and if we repeat it enough times, hopefully those on the Treasury Bench will eventually listen.

Many of the victims of this national scandal come from a generation that was encouraged to plan for retirement, saving modestly for a rainy day. We need to continue to encourage all generations to plan for retirement, but scandals such as this one negatively impact on that ambition. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), who is unfortunately no longer in his place, so eloquently described that ambition, so I will not attempt to add anything further. He said everything that needed to be said about that.

As other Members have said, many Equitable Life victims are characterised as proud, hard-working people who previously worked in shops or factories, or who ran their own small business and invested their money in good faith, so as not to be a burden on the state or, indeed, their families in old age. Such are the conservative— with a small “c”—values that my party in particular has always championed, so it was only right that when we came into government in 2010, it was a Conservative Chancellor, the former Member for Tatton, who established a compensation scheme worth £1.5 billion to compensate policyholders who had been affected. But of course, as we all know, that was not enough.

Although the scheme initially only covered polices issued after 1 September 1992—an arbitrary date—it is important to recognise the steps that the Government have subsequently taken to compensate as many victims as possible, which mean that as it stands today, £5,000 is available to those who bought-with-profits annuities from Equitable Life prior to September 1992, with a further £5,000 going to those on pension credit. Nevertheless, we need to do more. The stark reality is that, although the compensation is substantial, to date nearly a million savers have received less than a quarter of the losses they incurred when the Equitable Life scandal hit them.

With the compensation scheme now closed to new applicants, I make the case to my hon. Friend on the Treasury Bench that now is the time to unlock the Treasury over time.

Let me turn briefly to regulation and the findings of the parliamentary ombudsman, who found that the losses suffered could be directly attributed to decades of serious, serial regulatory maladministration. As the UK is a global financial hub, it is vital, especially in a post-Brexit world, that the Government learn the lessons of the past and ensure that we have in place a regulatory framework that not only attracts investment but can retain investor confidence in our financial institutions, regardless of the size of the investment.

Joanna Cherry: The hon. Lady is making some good points, and I like the one about the dangers of undermining confidence in the financial sector. Does she agree that the financial sector is massively important not only to London but to Edinburgh, where my constituency is? Edinburgh has the second biggest financial sector in the UK. If we do not sort out the problem of regulation, confidence in the financial sector may be lost.

Maggie Throup: I completely agree with the hon. and learned Lady. Along with London and Edinburgh, Leeds is a great financial centre as well. It is important that we get this right to make sure we continue to have that confidence.

We are as united as ever not only on the Government Benches but, I believe, on the Opposition Benches too, in agreement that now is the time for victims of this preventable scandal to receive a final and fair package of compensation that they can use to fund their retirement. It is incumbent on the Government to learn the lessons identified in the parliamentary ombudsman’s report, and to review and, if necessary, reform the regulations, to ensure that a situation like this can never happen again.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East again on securing this debate which, as we can see, has a lot of support on what is a very cold and potentially snowy Thursday afternoon. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

1.39 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is estimated that there are around 1,500 victims of the Equitable Life scandal in Lincoln, and I have been working closely with some of them. After years of campaigning, nearly 1 million people are still being told that their compensation is limited to less than a quarter of the loss that they have suffered, and many of those savers are nurses, teachers, civil servants and shop workers. They are not people with stocks of wealth to keep them in their old age. They have worked hard all their life and put money aside for a secure and peaceful retirement, just as the Government advised them to do. It is therefore completely unjust to expect them to accept only a fraction of the losses caused by administrative errors that were out of their control.
In 2010, the Government accepted in full the parliamentary ombudsman’s findings that the victims of the scandal should be promptly compensated for their losses, and that those losses were directly attributable to chronic failures by the Treasury and regulators. The former Chancellor, the previous Member for Tatton, stood up in this House in October 2010 and implied that, despite accepting the ombudsman’s findings in full, the Government could not afford to allocate more than £1.5 billion for victims due to his choice of embarking on a damaging and counterproductive austerity project. It is worth remembering that, although there is cross-party support for this cause, every Member here knows that it was ordinary people who suffered under austerity, at the same time as very wealthy people got tax cuts, and those tax cuts were clearly the Government’s priority at that point.

Dr Drew: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Karen Lee: No, I will not. I want to make some progress.

The victims appear to have fallen between the cracks of the financial crisis, which saw our banking corporations bailed out while hard-working and responsible pensioners were left to suffer. This is not charity. This is repaying hard-earned and prudently saved money to its rightful owners, and that is surely something that we should be supporting. The Government’s refusal to repay in full has real-life consequences. Hundreds of thousands of people across the UK have been denied the secure retirement that they made sacrifices for throughout their career.

In Lincoln, one of my constituents, Jill, has been fighting on behalf of local victims of this scandal. She said:

“My husband and I worked hard throughout our careers. We were devastated to find that all but a small proportion of our pension pot, for which we had saved so hard, has been lost to us. All we ask is that we are paid the money that is owed to us, and that we saved so hard for. I really hope that the Government will do the right thing and ensure that the thousands of claimants in Lincoln and across the UK finally get the pension they are entitled to.”

If austerity really is over—I am holding my breath on that one—I sincerely hope that the Government will finally listen to Jill and the hundreds of thousands of others who have, through no fault of their own, been stripped of their hard-earned savings. It is time for the victims of this scandal to receive the justice that they deserve and the full pension repayment that they have been fighting for.

1.42 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in the debate, and also to have a chance to reflect on how some of my constituents have suffered as a result of what happened with Equitable Life. However, it is probably worth saying briefly now that, over the past few years, the tax take from the wealthiest in society has gone up, not down.

Let me turn to the general focus of this debate. It is worth remembering that these investments would not have been seen as high risk. People would not have thought that their capital was linked to the performance of the stock market. They would not have thought that they would lose their money entirely. They saw these investments as something for their lifetime savings—they used to be referred to as “widows and orphans’ investments—and they would not have expected to lose the whole lot of their money. This was not buying shares in equity or playing on foreign exchange markets, when a person has to accept that there is a chance that they will lose not just what they think they might have gained, but the actual capital they invested. It is therefore understandable that this case has had much more of an impact on those affected than would have been the case had they been investing in the types of products with such enhanced risks.

I pay tribute to Usha Waygood, the co-ordinator of Torbay EMAG, for the determination that she has shown over many years, as well as for the information that she sent me ahead of this debate. It is worth reflecting on the fact that this is a business that ceased trading in 2000—19 years ago. It is clear that a total failure of regulation in relation to the company led to its collapse. The parliamentary ombudsman’s report was compiled in 2008—long before many of us in the Chamber had even been elected as Members.

There was then—the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) reflected on this in his interesting speech—a lack of response by the then Government, which was a huge concern. Thankfully, that situation was partially rectified in 2010, when we finally saw some action taken with the independent commission. It is worth saying people still saw only 22.4% of what they had lost paid to them.

To help me put that into perspective, I asked some of my constituents who had been affected to set out the cost to them. For example, Mr Brian Wills-Pope said:

“I have had 10% of the differences I should have got.”

Mr Gordon Cook said:

“It has cost me about £5,000 per annum in pension.”

Mr David Jones added that the loss was approximately £30,000. He was paid around £6,000 from the compensation fund in 2012. When Mr Robert Clee emailed me, he said that his pension had seriously depleted over the past 25 years, which coincided with his retirement, which he thought that he had provided for adequately. That is the issue: many of the investors were approaching retirement and therefore had little opportunity either to take on new work or to make alternative arrangements before they felt the full impact of the hit to their finances.

For me, this is about not just what happened—that has been well documented—but about what could happen next. I certainly join other Members in asking the Minister to look at retaining all the necessary data in perpetuity, given that there is an ongoing impact on those affected. That reassurance should certainly not be too difficult to give.

I am also interested in hearing a bit more about the point that has been made by some campaign groups in relation to the pre-1992 with-profits annuitants who could be given equality with later annuitants through the £140 million underspend from the £1.5 billion that has been cited. I am realistic—I accept that money does not grow on trees and cannot just be printed—but perhaps something could be done over the coming years. No one is saying that the money should be paid immediately. We accept that these are people who are looking for support over a period of time.
It is worth looking at some of the other impacts that resolving these issues would have. It is about a potential reliance not just on state—national—projects, but at a local government level, given the age of some of these people. Clearly they are starting to make social care payments, which would have been mitigated had they received the savings that they originally expected to have for their retirement.

It is vital that we reflect on how we ensure that people have confidence that this will not happen again—I am sure the Minister will consider that when he comes to respond to the debate.

Dr Drew: There is another problem. I wonder how many of our constituents have faith in the ombudsman, given that when it has made a recommendation, that has not, in any way, been seen through by Government.

Kevin Foster: I think that it is probably safe to say that there has been some action from this Government in responding to the recommendations of the parliamentary ombudsman, but this is about building faith and about people having confidence. Let me be blunt about this. There are those of us who have just turned 40. We want to make sure that those who are taking part in auto-enrolment and who are looking to retire in the future have the confidence to start putting money aside. Bluntly, I am putting money aside now for my pension. I will be 68 when I am entitled to take my state pension. I have to be confident that my money will still be there in 28 years’ time. I accept that, as Members of Parliament, we are in a unique situation, but people in the workforce want to have confidence that if they put away money that they do not plan to access for 30, 40 or even 50 years, it will still be there. It is so vital that that confidence is there. Ultimately, the pension system, like any other savings and investment scheme, operates on the basis of confidence. People need to be confident that if they put money away, it will still be there. They need to understand the risk that they are taking at the time. As we touched on, people viewed these schemes them as a pension investment—a secure pot—not as a high-risk investment through which, yes, the returns might be high, but there was a clear and present risk to their capital as well as to any future profits.

I am conscious that we need to move on because we have another debate to follow, so I will draw my remarks to a close. I hope that we will be able to make progress and that people in Torbay who have been waiting for so long, and who probably would not have expected their MP to still be talking about this issue 19 years after the company’s collapse, will have something to look forward to.

1.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for setting the scene, and the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who is not in his place, for his help in bringing this matter to the House for consideration. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). He usually sweeps up on the Government side of the Chamber and I often do the same on the Opposition side, but we often agree. And here we are again agreeing on an issue that he is interested in as the Member for Torbay, and that I am interested in as the Member for Strangford.

We all know the background to this story because we have spoken about it many times, but that does not take away one bit from the fact that, as the hon. Member for Harrow East said, it is as shocking today as it was back then. Like other hon. Members, I believe that we should honour the obligation and the pledge. The hon. Gentleman said that very clearly in his introduction. Well, I will tell the House something: I am also here to ask my Minister, of my Government, to honour that pledge. We look to the Minister for the satisfaction that our constituents need, and that is why each and every Member here is present today.

Let me gently break the issue down one more time, in the hope that the reality of the situation will provoke a greater scale of action some 20 years later. Let us remember that the Equitable Life victims are typically retired nurses, teachers, civil servants, factory workers, shop workers and small business owners who had no choice but to set up a personal pension. Before I was elected to this place in 2010, I was a Member of the Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland, and one issue that came to my attention then was that of the Equitable Life policyholders, especially as there are dozens in my Strangford constituency. Unfortunately, some of them have passed on, so they never had the satisfaction of seeing this being addressed. I am here to uphold the policies of the people who are still living and to express some disquiet about those who have not had that satisfaction. With all our busyness as Assembly Members and MPs, I tried to address this matter along with many other Members, because this is not just Jim Shannon; this is everybody together—Members of all parties, on both sides of the Chamber—recognising that a wrong has to be righted.

There are people who have worked hard and worked away to secure their retirement, but to date almost 1 million pension savers have received less than a quarter—some 22%—of the losses they incurred when the Equitable Life Assurance Society nearly collapsed. Just before I was elected to this place in 2010, I was contacted by people in my constituency who had been stung by the Equitable Life scandal, and they all pointed to the fact that the parliamentary ombudsman clearly concluded in 2008 that the victims’ loss was directly attributable to a decade of serious, serial regulatory maladministration. In fact, just last year the Treasury admitted that it was culpable for the scandal. That is the story, so we look again to the Minister for his response.

In 2010, I can well remember the Government accepting that victims’ losses amounted to £4.3 billion, and I was disappointed at the allocation of £1.5 billion for compensation—a decision that was justified on the basis of the perilous state of the public finances, as other Members have mentioned. I was a member of the APPG that secured a small victory in 2010 with the passage of the Equitable Life (Payments) Act 2010 and the establishment of a scheme to pay limited compensation to qualifying Equitable Life members. But this payment was not enough, and the people who are missing out are the most vulnerable. The compensation amounted to only 22.4% of the relative losses of 895,000 traced pension savers. This was the sum left after compensating the people with annuities who had already retired.
Ensuring that this large cohort of pension savers receive the unpaid balance of the full 100% of their relative losses would cost £2.6 billion. May I suggest that, when our finances are better, this small figure should be considered in order to bring the situation to a conclusion?

In the 2013 Budget, a cohort of 9,200 with-profits annuitants who took out contracts before 1992 received only £5,000 each, or £10,000 if they were eligible for pension credit. I stand today to support the call for these victims, who are the oldest and most vulnerable, to be afforded the same treatment as their younger counterparts, who bought their annuities later. We have a duty to deliver this. It would cost an estimated £100 million and could be funded today from the unspent £140 million in the Treasury’s coffers from the current scheme. If the money is there, let us do what is right. It seems like simple mathematics to me.

I am well known as someone who does not advocate borrowing like there is no tomorrow. I have a bit of Ulster Scots in me—every pound’s a prisoner. We are very careful in what we do, and that was instilled in me by my mum and dad.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Only the good book.

Jim Shannon: Absolutely. Joking aside, the mathematics are plain. I understand that it is my children and grandchildren who will be paying off our debts for their whole lives, and I am supportive of efforts to reduce the deficit, although this cannot be done at the expense of those who are vulnerable and ill. More focus should be put on the higher rate tax bracket, but that is a debate for another day.

We have brought down the deficit and are no longer in a position of a financial crisis. I thank the Government for that because they worked hard to make it happen, and we support them—well done. Therefore, there could well be a time when we can do what is right by every person affected by the maladministration.

A briefing provided to me has outlined the fact that Equitable Life victims were pushed to one side as a direct consequence of the timing of the 2008 financial crisis, which saw the UK’s banking corporations bailed out while hard-working and responsible pension savers took the hit. Now that the Government have sold their interest in Lloyds and are reducing their stake in RBS, it would be fitting to use a small portion of the money recouped to finally settle the acknowledged debt to Equitable Life victims. There is a clear cross-party consensus, from right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber who have a real heart for their constituents—for Equitable Life members who have policies that need to be delivered. It is so important that we honour that pledge, but to be able to do this we must be able to retain the necessary information.

Like other Members, I ask the City Minister to guarantee that Her Majesty’s Treasury and other relevant agencies will retain indefinitely the necessary data—addresses, policy numbers and amounts paid—to make the further future repayments that we are calling for. If he were to provide this assurance on the Floor of the House, it would provide a great deal of comfort to Equitable Life victims that there is hope for the future. I say very gently to everyone here that our duty is to deliver for our constituents. We are in this House because they voted for us, and we are here today to put forward their case. It is a collective decision of all Members present to request that these things happen.

Time has beaten me but I must stress one last time, on behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, that these people are victims. We have outlined wrongdoings and maladministration, and have paid out a small amount of money that is due. If we are in the position to do more, we must ensure that we do. But, more importantly, we must send the message that we are actually willing to do that; that it what it is really all about.

1.57 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Today we have heard a powerful and consistent voice across this Chamber to end this scandal. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing this debate to the House. Like all former councillors, he cut straight to the heart of the matter and how it affects people’s daily lives, and he did so with eloquence and controlled anger. He is right to be angry on behalf of the people who have been affected by this scandal. He laid out the history and pointed out that it is a Ponzi scheme, and he is right that it has been a web of greed and exploitation leading people to this point. I add my voice to his clamour for the Government to honour, in full, the support needed by the victims, and I back his three asks in getting past this situation.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who is not in his place, talked about the life-changing negative effects of this issue, and has been a constant champion of the victims. I am glad that he returned in time to hear me say that. He mentioned the report that described a decade of regulatory failure. It gave a well-informed exposition of the issue, and mentioned two shocking statistics—that 100,000 cannot be traced and over 15,000 people have died. What a disgrace.

The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) and the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) asked how people having to save for their retirement can have confidence in the system when this matter has been allowed to drag on in this way and how, in this state of affairs, they also, quite rightly, pointed out that this is creating a framework for hostility towards pension saving. The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) underlined those points. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who is no longer in his place, said that it was a failure of Government to have dealt only partly with this. He should know. He is an expert in failures of history to this, and, as many others did subsequently, talked about the opportunity to get some of the money back on the RBS shares as a way of settling this scandal for people. That should be taken on board. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the choices that Governments make. As a DUP MP, he knows about the choices that this Government make in terms of spending their money. There are lessons to be learned by Government Front Benchers on this. The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) also underlined some of the things that need to be done by the Government, so I hope that the ministerial earplugs were left behind before the Minister came into the Chamber today.
Let us be clear: the only thing equitable in this whole saga is the name “Equitable”; everything else about it has been rotten. This scandal has simply been allowed to continue beyond any reasonable timeframe. So as Equitable Life is finally wound up, the UK must now, belatedly, ensure that justice is delivered for those affected by this scandal. That means dealing with the issue of compensation, and that can only be done when the loss is fully quantified by negotiating the correct sums involved.

The EMAG website states that the £1.5 billion covers only 20% of the losses incurred and argues that there should be Government action to pay full compensation. At the moment, there is a huge gap between what is required and what the Government have set aside in their £500 million fund. I ask the Minister: when will the compensation be fully agreed?

In June 2018, it was announced that Equitable Life would finally be shutting down, with a surprise £6.9 billion windfall for the last remaining policyholders, while about 261,000 people will have a share in a £1.8 billion pay-out following the transfer of its business, Reliance Life, through unlocked capital. That is good news, perhaps, for those who have hung around, but the 800,000 former policyholders—the vast majority—who were shifted to other providers or encouraged to cash in and cut their losses will get nothing from that. EMAG says that policyholders who left Equitable Life will still remain £2.5 billion out of pocket. As Paul Braithwaite of EMAG said:

“Equitable has crafted an elegant termination strategy for the small number of remaining members, but it will be no benefit to the vast majority of victims. If the remaining members vote in favour of this deal, they are likely to come out ahead. But for every one of them, there are five who left the society who are much worse off.”

That vote, as we know, will go ahead in the coming months.

The UK Government must now finally deal with the outstanding injustices felt by these aggrieved policyholders. Those people saved throughout their lives. They were encouraged—to do so by successive Governments in this place. They lost the savings they had entrusted to those whom the Government, in turn, had entrusted to look after them. The Government have not only failed them—they have failed to treat this with the due urgency it requires, or, indeed, the compassion it requires. They failed to compensate them, and that must be put right now. In doing so, the Government must consider the deep impact that scandals such as Equitable Life have on public confidence in pension schemes, and how they could end up actually deterring those who should be saving for their future needs. I therefore say to the Minister: “Let us make a commitment. Let us hear that from you to end the scandal, to belatedly make amends, to make it right, to make it fair, and, with no irony intended, to make it equitable for all those who have suffered.”

2.4 pm

**Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab):** I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this debate, which has been thoughtful and considered. Both he and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) have persisted to ensure that this important issue remains high on the political agenda over the years. They have worked tirelessly and they should be commended by this House.

The hon. Member for Harrow East set out the situation clearly, and it is a very unsettling picture. Hon. Members have spoken of the debt of honour and of the erosion of trust in this House that we face for failing to rectify this injustice. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said that she herself has been affected by the collapse of Equitable Life, highlighting the sheer scale of the impact this issue has had across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) explained how it has affected people across a wide swathe of society—nurses, doctors, teachers and civil servants. Hon. Members have spoken of the despair and distress that this failure and collapse has caused to so many of our constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East described it as one of the greatest financial scandals of the modern age. I hope that the Minister has heard the clear and unambiguous views of many Members from across the Chamber.

As has been set out, this issue stretches all the way back to 2000, when Equitable Life Assurance Society closed to new business and was forced to acknowledge that it could not deliver for its policyholders, leaving up to 1 million policyholders out of pocket through no fault of their own. Following the society’s collapse, the Government of the day set up the independent Penrose inquiry, which raised serious questions about the practices that had been happening at Equitable Life. This decade of mismanagement, combined with maladministration, was a major contributor to the society’s collapse. As we have heard, the Penrose inquiry was followed by an ombudsman report in 2008 that found that this mismanagement had corresponded with

“a decade of regulatory failure”.

This included an inadequate response to the chief executive’s appointment; inadequacy of advice by the Government Actuary’s Department; and poor transparency on the part of other Departments, including the Treasury.

In 2009, the Government apologised and appointed an independent adviser, Sir John Chadwick, to provide guidance on how to determine and resolve various technical issues. During this time, both the European Parliament and the Public Administration Committee had published sympathetic independent reports. It is worth noting that in 2010, the Conservative party manifesto, as many Members have mentioned, included a commitment to making

“fair and transparent payments to Equitable Life policy holders”.

All this culminated in a payment worth £1.5 billion in compensation to policyholders. As we have heard, the Equitable Members Action Group campaigners remain unsatisfied with this response, arguing that their losses amounted to more than £4 billion. This leaves a significant disparity in the losses faced and compensation awarded that so far has not been adequately explained or addressed by the Government. Instead, the Chadwick report of July 2010 concluded that relative loss should be defined as “those who have suffered financial loss”, but pointed out that the ombudsman recognised that losses in policy values were only partly due to maladministration, and that the backdrop to cuts in policy values was a sharp
fall in world stock markets that all life insurance companies were forced to respond to. Similarly, the report argued that compensation should be assessed on the cost of maladministration as opposed to the size of investor losses.

However, we are politicians, and we can revisit decisions and choices. The Minister has been asked to consider carefully whether the Government should make different decisions or choices today, with the benefit of hindsight. After all, regardless of how fault is distributed among the institutions involved, these policyholders have found themselves significantly out of pocket, through no wrongdoing of their own.

Many Members from across the House, including colleagues from the shadow Front Bench, as well as the leader of the Labour party, have met the campaign to listen to its concerns and the full details of the case. I would therefore like to ask the Minister whether he has met the campaign, and whether he might consider doing so in the days following this debate, to hear its case directly.

Given that the Government have accepted that there were regulatory failures and offered some compensation already, they may be open to further discussions, to respond to the clear dissatisfaction that so many policyholders feel about how this matter was resolved. I hope the Minister will give a clearer sense of the Government’s willingness to look again at this matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) raised the important matter of policyholders’ data. The campaign is anxious that the necessary data is retained, to ensure that policyholders can be identified were there to be a change in Government policy. The campaign has hoped for reassurance from the Minister, and perhaps we will have that today.

Lastly, while I have discussed the position of Equitable Life policyholders throughout my speech, there is also the question of the regulatory environment now. We have to ensure that lessons have been learned, so that such an awful case can never happen again. The regulatory frameworks that operate in this country must be continually stress-tested and reviewed. Regulatory organisations need the appropriate resources to ensure that proper regulation occurs. We have to consider that 100 or 150 people are looking at 200 insurance companies. What protections have the Government put in place to guarantee that similar regulatory failures cannot happen again? That seems an important consideration, not only to reflect on the past and seek justice for those affected, but to ensure that we do not repeat the same mistakes.

I hope the Minister will be able to offer a satisfactory answer to the questions I have raised. Clearly a serious injustice was faced by policyholders at Equitable Life, which has been the source of much discussion, inquiry and debate over many years, yet those affected do not feel that this has been resolved adequately. The Government have looked at this matter before, and I hope they will resolve to look at it again and begin a full and proper process of consultation with the campaign. Ultimately, people’s savings are in question, lost through no fault or wrongdoing of their own but a combination of factors outside their control. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

2.11 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): It is a privilege to respond to the debate. First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) on their tireless work on this issue, which has helped the Government to achieve so much. I attended a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders last September, and the respect of colleagues on both sides of the House for those Members’ work was clear.

This well-documented topic has been explored once again in detail today, with 10 eloquent and measured speeches by Members on both sides of the House. I need to declare an interest. My father worked in a glasshouse nursery all his life and paid in modest sums each month to Equitable Life. He received the compensation of 22.4% to a bond that he was paying into. Sadly, he died of mesothelioma aged 69, just two years ago. I know that it was a matter of grave concern for him, and he took the money and invested it somewhere else. I am very familiar with the long history of this case.

I want to take this opportunity to remind Members that, on this issue, this Government have taken more action than any previous one. Using the ombudsman’s findings, we determined the reduced returns that policyholders received to be £4.1 billion. That is significantly more than the £340 million arrived at by the previous Labour Government in the Chadwick review, which was then dismissed. That increase is because we generously assumed that every new investor consulted the incorrect regulatory returns and, on the sole basis of those returns, made an investment.

In 2010, we announced that up to £1.5 billion would be made available for payments. Those payments were tax-free, which increased their value even more. Out of that £1.5 billion, following representations from groups such as the Equitable Members Action Group, we decided to pay the group of with-profits annuitants in full. The total cost of those annual payments was estimated to be around £625 million. As several Members have mentioned, there is an additional £100 million contingency fund in place to provide for annuitants should they live longer than their actuarial forecast, and we expect the contingency to be drawn on from the middle of the next decade. The remaining funding was distributed pro rata to remaining eligible policyholders. The scheme operated successfully for around five years, and in 2016 the operation was wound down.

There has, reasonably, been a degree of repetition in the asks made today, and three key points were raised. I have listened closely to those representations, and I would like to deal with some of them in turn. First, I have received suggestions that all policyholder records should be retained indefinitely, in case further payments are made. There has been correspondence between the Treasury and the APPG on that matter, and I can assure Members that relevant records are currently retained and will continue to be as long as it is legal. I can reassure the House that there are no plans to destroy any records.

Secondly, I am aware that some are dissatisfied with the £1.5 billion and suggest that it is incompatible with the ombudsman’s report. However, Members will be aware that the ombudsman wrote to the APPG on that
issue and said that the Government’s decisions could not be said to be incompatible with her report. That spending decision was taken in the wider context of other spending priorities. I recognise that there is a whole range of opinions about spending priorities. That is what we do—we make relative decisions. This decision needed to be fair to the taxpayer, who funded these payments, and £1.5 billion was, on balance, judged to be the most appropriate figure.

I want to be clear: when this settlement was made, it was not subject to future review by the Government. I note the inference by the APPG and Members from the statement at the time, but no specific commitment was made to return to that calculation. No obligation linked it to the future state of public finances. There have been representations that this issue should be reopened and that a further £2.6 billion should be paid to policyholders. The Government’s position on this is clear, and I have set it out in my letters to the APPG and my meeting with it last year. Being in government is about making difficult decisions. Our decision was to spend £1.5 billion, reversing and multiplying by four the previous Government’s dismissal of its commitment to £340 million. These difficult decisions are about how to be fair to both hard-working taxpayers and those in receipt of public spending and services, and where the need to spend public money is greatest.

I acknowledge the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) concerning the imperative to provide for the next generation and, as several Members said, to restore trust in pensions and pension savings. There is cross-party consensus on that, and both parties have worked hard to achieve a lot in terms of auto-enrolment. There is more work to be done in that space. None the less, the House will recognise that the opportunity cost to the Exchequer of paying a further £2.6 billion should be paid to policyholders. The Government’s position on this is clear, and I have set it out in my letters to the APPG and my meeting with it last year. Being in government is about making difficult decisions. Our decision was to spend £1.5 billion, reversing and multiplying by four the previous Government’s dismissal of its commitment to £340 million. These difficult decisions are about how to be fair to both hard-working taxpayers and those in receipt of public spending and services, and where the need to spend public money is greatest.

Gordon Marsden: I am listening with some concern, as I am sure other Members are, to what appears to be an edging further and further away from the commitments that we have all asked for this afternoon. The Minister talks about priorities. We could spend three hours in this Chamber talking about the priorities that this Government have given to tax cuts and other things. He needs to choose his words carefully in responding to what has been said.

John Glen: I will choose my words carefully, but it is undeniable that after 13 years in government, the previous Labour Government—

Gordon Marsden: Stop playing party politics.

John Glen: It is not about party politics; it is about saying that when we came into government, in the absence of a resolution to this matter, we increased the figure from £340 million, which the last Labour Government were proposing, to more than £1.5 billion. In the light of those facts, it is a bit unreasonable to criticise what I am saying. While I appreciate and empathise with the fact that some policyholders who have invested their funds have not received the funds that they hoped for, like my late father, and that this impacted on their plans and futures, we have taken the best action that we could have to resolve the Government’s part in these reduced returns. We have done more than any previous Government.

I draw colleagues’ attention to Equitable Life’s own research from 2011, which suggested that their policyholders wanted the Government compensation to draw a line under this issue. I agree with them. The Government’s view is that this issue is now closed, and as a Minister I have never been in the business of offering false hope.

2.20 pm

Bob Blackman: With the leave of the House, I would like to thank the 10 right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in the debate and the numerous other colleagues who made interventions. I regard the Minister as an honourable Friend, and I understand that he has to maintain a solid line from the Treasury and the Chancellor. That is clearly his job, but the 1 million people out there who are victims of this scandal will be disappointed with what my hon. Friend has had to say. The reality is that we have a debt of honour. I believe that we should repay that debt. It can be done over a period, not necessarily all at once, as we have said during the debate.

Drew Hendry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I am summing up, and I have to keep very tightly to time.

I am grateful for all the praise that has been heaped on me and the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for the campaign that we have continued to run. I would much rather that the Government honoured the commitment that we all made in 2010 to deliver full compensation for the victims of the scandal. During the debate, our membership of the all-party parliamentary group has increased yet again. We now have 238 members, and we have been joined by no less a figure than the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the former leader of the Labour party.

If the Government do not wake up to the fact that, on a cross-Bench basis, we are determined to get justice for Equitable Life policyholders, they may find that if they do not do the right thing it will be forced upon them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House welcomes the Government’s acceptance in full of the Parliamentary Ombudsman’s findings in relation to its maladministration with regard to Equitable Life; notes that the Parliamentary Ombudsman recommended that policy holders should be put back in the position they would have been in had maladministration not occurred; further notes that the overwhelming majority of victims have only received partial compensation compared to the confirmed losses directly attributed to regulatory failures; and calls on the Government to make a commitment to provide full compensation to victims of the scandal with the end of austerity now in sight.

Matt Rodda: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During my brief intervention during the debate I was unable to mention that I have a close relative who was one of the policyholders and he has suffered as a result. I should like to add that for the benefit of the record.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and for giving me prior notice of it. I am sure that the House will appreciate it that as soon as possible he has been able to register the fact that he had a relative who was involved in the scheme.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I understand that at business questions today the Leader of the House was asked by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) what the timetable would be if, when she puts her withdrawal agreement or a deal to the House again it is voted down. He asked whether in those circumstances an amendable motion would be laid the following day. My understanding is that the Leader of the House did not give a positive reply to that and did not suggest that it would be tabled the following day, even though the Prime Minister said in her statement that in those circumstances if the deal was voted down again she would table an amendable motion for debate the next day.

There is real alarm about the discrepancy between what the Prime Minister said and what the Leader of the House said. Have you heard anything from the Government about whether they are trying to change the proposals that the Government put forward and, if they are not, why was the statement of the Leader of the House different?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order. I am afraid that I was not here to hear what the Leader of the House said. It is not for the Chair to rule on possible discrepancies, if there are any, between statements from one Minister or another. However, she has put her concern on the record. The Treasury Bench will have heard her concerns. There is obviously the opportunity at business questions next week to raise this, but in the meantime if further clarification is required I am sure that the right hon. Lady will know that there are various ways in which she can raise that in the course of next week.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was here for business questions and I had the opportunity to hear the response from the Leader of the House. Perhaps my hearing is not as good as everybody else’s, but I heard her say that it would take place the next day. That was the assurance, which was similar to what the Prime Minister said. Perhaps I heard her wrong, but I can say genuinely that I heard her confirm that, and I want to put that on the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has put his finger on the different interpretations that have been made of what the Leader of the House said. However, as I say, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard that there is perhaps a little confusion about exactly the position, and that it might be wise to clarify that before too long.

Yvette Cooper: I put that on the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that I was not here to hear what the Leader of the House said. It is not for the Chair to rule on possible discrepancies, if there are any, hear what the Leader of the House said. It is not for the Chair to rule on possible discrepancies, if there are any.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I would like to put on record my thanks to the Minister who will be responding to the debate and the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), both of whom have engaged thoughtfully and in a committed way with the APPG on nursery schools. I know that both of them share my commitment to the viability and sustainability of schools.

I want to put the Government and the Treasury on notice that we now need the warm words and commitment of the Department for Education backed up with the commitment of some real cash, which we need urgently. Our maintained nursery schools are some of the most excellent institutions in our education system. They transform lives, especially for the most vulnerable. They are what I often describe as the jewel in the crown of social mobility. Ofsted has judged 63% of them as outstanding, and the remaining 35% as good. That is nearly three times the number of private and voluntary nurseries rated as such.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I congratulate my hon. Friend on collating the petitions from various parts of the country. In Coventry the headteacher at Hill Fields nursery, Mrs Brinson, is always concerned about the inadequacy of funding, but more importantly about the fact that there are no guarantees beyond 2020. Does my hon. Friend hope, like me, that the Minister will rectify that when he winds up?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is right. This is the key issue. It is about by when we need this funding commitment. I hope that the Minister
will get a strong signal from the House that he can take back to the Treasury and get the commitment that we need.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on having secured this important debate about the sustainability of maintained nursery schools. More than 1,500 very concerned Slough constituents have signed petitions on this very issue from Slough Centre, Cippenham, Chalvey, Baylis Court and Lea nurseries. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are to ensure the brightest possible future for our young children, we need to invest properly in their education from an early years nursery stage?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend has made a very good point. We will be handing in a number of petitions in the House next week. We know that the single biggest indicator of how well children will do in their GCSEs is their developmental level at the age of five. That is why the critical early years are so important.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and the all-party parliamentary group on the excellent work that they have done so far. The figure of 64% is striking in this context: 64% of nursery schools are in the most deprived parts of the country, and 64% of nursery schools face a deficit unless the Government change course. Do those two identical percentages not indicate that nursery schools need a fairer funding settlement?

Lucy Powell: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. He has, in fact, summarised my entire speech in one sentence, so perhaps I will cut it down a bit.

Let me return to the value of our maintained nursery schools, and explain why they are the jewel in the crown. Their admissions policies prioritise children with the greatest need: they have a strong track record of boosting early development for all children, but especially the most vulnerable. As my hon. Friend has just said, they are located in some of the most deprived parts of the country. We are all seeking to ensure that the highest-quality education is provided in the areas of most need, and we have achieved that with our maintained nursery schools. They have a unique pool of expertise in supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities—about one in five children in maintained nursery schools has special educational needs—but they also apply their expertise to many other aspects of provision. They have a network of teaching school alliances, and work holistically with other services in their areas. They are family hubs in all but name.

Why, then, are we worried about the sustainability of these schools? As the Minister knows, we have had similar debates before. Because of the campaigning that we did a few years ago, the Government committed themselves to transitional funding of £60 million for three years to keep the schools going, but that money is about to run out. Decisions are being made now about future staffing and place provision, and, unfortunately, they are having to be made in the context of not knowing whether the funding will continue.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Lucy Powell: I will take one more intervention.

Matthew Pennycook: There are three outstanding maintained nursery schools in my constituency, as my hon. Friend knows. She has visited one of them. Each of them is telling me that three-year budget planning, which is a requirement, is impossible when they do not know how much money will be provided. They cannot wait for the spending review, whose date might slip.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have indeed visited one of the schools in his constituency, and it is an exemplar of what is so good about the sector.

It is a false economy to allow maintained nursery schools to close. A report published recently by Yorkshire and Lincolnshire local authorities about the “hidden benefits” of maintained nursery schools showed that if they were not there, it would cost other services more than £1.2 million a year, which is considerably more than the budget of those schools.

Why have we reached the point at which we have these funding problems? Unfortunately, a perfect storm is facing our maintained nursery schools. Because of the recently introduced changes in the early years funding formula, local authorities no longer have the additional discretion to subsidise high-quality nursery schools. The 30-hours funding formula has put extra pressure on the schools, because they do not get all the funding back for taking children for 30 hours. Because maintained nursery schools are schools, they have the overheads of schools, including the costs of headteachers, special educational needs co-ordinators and others, but that is often not recognised in their funding formula.

Another factor in the perfect storm is the dramatic cut in local authorities’ funding. If, as proposed, deprivation will no longer be taken into account in the local authority funding formula, the sector will be decimated. We are already seeing the impact of that perfect storm, and we are nearing the transitional funding cliff edge. New figures confirmed by the House of Commons Library, which I have published today, show that nursery schools will lose nearly a third of their funding in 2020 if supplementary funding is not continued. We are now seeing the dire situation in which many nursery schools find themselves. More than a fifth of them are in the red, and the figure has risen significantly over the last few years.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Lucy Powell: I will take one more intervention.

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does she agree that it is pretty shocking that nursery schools are having to decide now about admissions in September without knowing what their budget for the whole of the next academic year will be?

Lucy Powell: As always, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is probably a consequence of Brexit—among other things—that the spending review has been pushed back and pushed back without people realising the impact that that is having on organisations that have been waiting for funding decisions, and especially on maintained nursery schools.
I have taken a number of interventions, so I will cut out some of what I had been going to say.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lucy Powell: Yes, I will take one more intervention, because I have cut my speech down.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady is being terribly generous. It took us only nine minutes to get to Brexit, but let us get back because this is the subject that we need to talk about.

There is an outstanding nursery school in my constituency, Boundstone in Lancing, which is in a deprived area and does a fantastic job. Because of cuts, it is now having to curtail the number of children under two whom it takes for day care. It is co-located with a children’s centre. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to look at the bigger picture? The impact—the knock-on effect—of not offering that care, which is respite care in some cases, on the safeguarding, social care and disability support offered by the local authority will be serious. It may well be a false economy, financially let alone socially, preventing the advancement of children who benefit from an excellent service in many nursery schools.

Lucy Powell: I could not agree more. As I said earlier, it would indeed be a false economy. Very few maintained nursery schools are merely providers of early education, high-quality though that is. Nearly all of them provide holistic support services for families in the early years. I believe that that is the direction of travel of Government policy, given a new review by the Leader of the House, and I know that the Minister and the Secretary of State are very committed to this agenda and have made a number of interventions recently. It would be a crying shame for the main institutions that support this work in some of our most deprived communities to be lost by stealth and through inaction rather than as a result of a deliberate strategy.

I do not want to pre-empt the Minister, but I know what he is likely to say today, because we have had this conversation many times. I am sure he will want to emphasise to local authorities that he does not want them to close nursery schools, but we must be honest: local authorities do not have the slack in their budgets. They are facing huge cuts themselves, especially in local authorities do not have the slack in their budgets. They are facing huge cuts themselves, especially in local authorities do not have the slack in their budgets. They are facing huge cuts themselves, especially in

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I do not want to pre-empt the Minister, but I know what he is likely to say today, because we have had this conversation many times. I am sure he will want to emphasise to local authorities that he does not want them to close nursery schools, but we must be honest: local authorities do not have the slack in their budgets. They are facing huge cuts themselves, especially in the areas where these schools operate, and further cuts are coming up the track. It really is the Government’s responsibility—as they have recognised in the past with their transitional funding arrangement—to ensure that the funds are there and secure for the long term. The Local Government Association has found that 61% of local authorities fear that maintained nursery schools will close unless the Government provide additional funding, and that fear is echoed in a report by London councils. I sent both reports to the Minister before Christmas.

We have heard time and again that Ministers are committed to keeping maintained nursery schools open, but those schools cannot wait for decisions that now look like not being made until the autumn. They need certainty this financial year. In the grand scheme of things, £60 million a year, for what these nursery schools offer, is a very small amount of money. I know the Minister agrees it would be social vandalism of the worst kind to let them go by default, even though we do not want them to go, simply because we cannot find the pot of money to keep them open.

The Minister has my full support in taking this case to the Treasury. I am sure that every speaker today will support him in making the strongest possible case to the Treasury. If he wants to come back to the House and ask for more support, I am sure we will give it to him. I hope he will take away today the very strong message that the transitional funding, which is about to run out, needs to be replaced this financial year.

2.40 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). I thank her for securing the debate and for the wonderful work she does as chair of the all-party group on nursery schools, nursery and reception classes.

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a small contribution to this debate, and I will start by drawing attention to the brilliant work that staff and support teams at maintained nursery schools do to provide some of the best early years education to our young children. It is no coincidence that almost 98% of maintained nursery schools are rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted. They are key drivers of social mobility and provide exceptional services and resources to children in their care. They offer superb support networks for children and their families, and deliver an excellent education that allows for greater personal development.

Chichester Nursery School in my constituency is a brilliant example. When I visited recently, I was impressed by the wonderful facilities and workshop areas, and I was not surprised to find it had been rated as outstanding in its latest Ofsted report. It is first rate. It was clear that the children were fully engaged with a wide range of enriching activities, both inside and outside the classroom, from crafts, technology and painting, to dressing up and woodwork. Three-year-olds were filming, cutting and sawing wood, cooking in mud kitchens, and participating in a variety of educational activities to rival any household in the country. It was wonderful to see, especially since many of them might not have had all that at home. They might not have been learning to ride a bike aged two or three if not for this nursery school.

The staff were eager to tailor educational experiences to the needs of their pupils. It is that level of care and support that gives the children the best start in life, and the personalised care offered is certainly helped by the fact that all the teachers need a level 3 teaching qualification, but having highly qualified staff naturally means higher operating costs. In that regard, I was recently contacted by Ruth Campbell, the new headteacher at the nursery school, who raised with me the concerns mentioned today about the future of maintained school funding.

The announcement in 2017 that the Government would sustain funding for maintained schools through to 2020 was warmly welcomed. The amount is just over £60 million per year. At the time, it provided certainty to headteachers such as Ruth, enabling them to produce medium-term plans for staffing allocations and to calculate what resources and equipment their school could afford in each academic year. However, the current uncertainty over funding arrangements beyond 2020 means that maintained nursery schools cannot adequately plan ahead, and we all need to be able to plan.
For this academic year, Chichester Nursery School has already had to make tough decisions about how to proceed with its budget and has said goodbye to some very valued members of staff. For any job to remain safe, guarantees that payroll demands can be met are essential. Teachers such as those at Chichester Nursery School are essential in providing for and influencing the minds and experiences of our young children, so I hope that the Department for Education can clarify funding arrangements as soon as possible.

Maintained nursery schools need to plan, and teachers and staff need to have their minds put at rest. Ruth has warned me that if this does not happen, she will be unable to meet the costs of her current staff, and that the equivalent of a full-time teacher, a nursery nurse and a full-time nursery assistant will be lost for the 2020-21 academic year, which would affect the number of pupils the school can care for. It would need to reduce its intake by 52 children, which would be a devastating loss to the local community.

Maintained nursery schools are important in helping some of the most disadvantaged children in the country and improving social mobility. Some 64% of them are based in the 30% of England that is most deprived. They are life changing. They provide a unique range of expertise, and the Government have a good record of supporting them so far, whether through the fairer early years national funding formula or the requirement for local education authorities to pass on 95% of received funding directly to providers.

We all understand the need for value for money in our public services, but getting the early years right for children is the most important investment we can make, as I am sure that everybody in the Chamber would agree. In helping young children to develop and in supporting families in their busy lives, maintained nurseries play an essential role in our communities. I hope that, as we near the end of the guaranteed funding, the Government will offer a meaningful long-term funding arrangement to keep this jewel in the crown of early years development.

2.46 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). She and my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) demonstrate the powerful cross-party support for the motion.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and her tireless work in giving a voice to the nursery school sector in this country. I also pay tribute to the fantastic work of the all-party group on nursery schools, and I want to quote from their respective Ofsted reports. Of East Prescot Road, Ofsted said:

“Children blossom in this outstanding school. Irrespective of their starting points, children thrive and make exceptional progress in their early learning. The achievement of the most able children and those with special educational needs is outstanding because of high-quality support and challenge.”

Of Ellergreen, it said:

“It is an excellent and improving school. It is a wonderful place to send your child, to look for support or to work. The outstanding quality of teaching helps children to make great strides forward in their learning. The school motto ‘broadening horizons, brightening futures’ shapes much of what the school does each day.”

Under the leadership of Jane Rogers and Colette Bentley, both schools do wonderful work in areas of my constituency with high social and economic need, and help to transform the life chances of children and families. Both headteachers place great emphasis, in particular, on ensuring that children who start with lower-than-average development are ready when they go to school, and I am grateful to the Minister for agreeing to meet them and me in two weeks. Both schools have outstanding reputations with their feeder schools for how school-ready their children are, and I think that is testament to the hard work of the staff of the two schools in providing the groundwork for a smooth transition to reception classes.

In Liverpool, we have five maintained nursery schools—three outstanding and two good. I am delighted that my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who is in the Chamber, and therefore unable to participate today, is in the Chamber, because I know he has worked very closely, since his election two years ago, with the outstanding Everton Nursery School, which serves one of the areas of greatest social and economic deprivation in our city. Everton’s head, Lesley Curtis, is a very powerful voice for nursery schools in Liverpool and also in the national debate.

Nursery schools are the very best of quality early years education. Not only do they directly benefit the children and families who attend the schools, but they have a much wider benefit across the early years sector, with the expertise of maintained nursery schools acting as a catalyst to raise standards and supporting early years settings to work together to improve their quality.

Mr Dhesi: Does my hon. Friend agree that maintained nursery schools have a unique pool of expertise in supporting children with special educational needs, which is particularly pertinent and important for places such as my Slough constituency? Without such expertise, they simply would not be able to cater effectively for so many children with special educational needs.

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who is in the Chamber, and therefore unable to participate today, is in the Chamber, because I know he has worked very closely, since his election two years ago, with the outstanding Everton Nursery School, which serves one of the areas of greatest social and economic deprivation in our city. Everton’s head, Lesley Curtis, is a very powerful voice for nursery schools in Liverpool and also in the national debate.

I am proud to have two maintained nursery schools in my constituency: East Prescot Road and Ellergreen. Like most nursery schools, both are rated as outstanding by Ofsted. Children receive an outstanding education at both schools, and I want to quote from their respective Ofsted reports. Of East Prescot Road, Ofsted said:

“Children blossom in this outstanding school. Irrespective of their starting points, children thrive and make exceptional progress in their early learning. The achievement of the most able children and those with special educational needs is outstanding because of high-quality support and challenge.”
they offer, they are often at the forefront of tackling inequality and poverty, driving social mobility and closing the attainment gap. Indeed, the Government’s own social mobility strategy declared in 2011:

“Children’s life chances are most heavily influenced by their development in the first five years of life. By the time children start at school there are already wide variations in ability between children from different backgrounds”.

I think that that is the case in general, but it is especially the case in cities such as Liverpool that have been hit hardest by austerity and have some of the highest levels of child and family poverty in the country.

In addition to providing high-quality education, the outstanding nursery schools in Liverpool work tirelessly to engage with parents and carers. From before the child has even started at nursery school, staff will work collaboratively with families to seek to provide the best outcomes for their children. For example, at East Prescott Road, parents are welcomed to the school and very much encouraged to feel part of the learning environment. It runs “Stay and Read” sessions, as well as practical workshops to help parents to support their children in early reading and mathematics, and to enable parents to have the confidence to support their children’s learning at home, as well as at school. The current data for East Prescott Road shows that its emphasis on supporting children with speech, language and communication needs is having a significant impact on reducing the gap between children with special needs and their peers.

At Ellergreen Nursery School, the staff go above and beyond. For example, last Christmas, as universal credit was rolled out in Liverpool, the staff donated presents and hampers to vulnerable families. Support is also provided to help families with problems such as housing and debt. Each morning, the nursery school provides all the children with breakfast, and it ensures that they take home a piece of fruit at the end of the school day.

If we are to tackle the multiple challenges of poverty, inequality and social mobility that we face in this country, we need to ensure that the best possible support is in place for children and families right from the very beginning. Early years education is at the heart of that, which is why it is so concerning that there is any question mark over the sustainability of our nursery schools.

As has already been said, maintained nursery schools meet higher standards than other providers—they employ a headteacher and they employ qualified teachers—so it is welcome that the Government recognise that the early years national funding formula did not adequately provide for nursery schools. As my hon. Friend set out, that poses serious challenges for nursery schools as they plan for the year ahead.

Liverpool’s annual supplement equates to £1.5 million. Without the protection of that funding, Liverpool’s maintained nursery schools, based on current staffing and expenditure, might not be financially sustainable. As Ellergreen Nursery School put it to me:

“What will happen to these vulnerable children and their families if the nursery schools are closed? All our years of developing high quality early years provision and our expertise will just be lost”.

That is clearly a very serious concern across Liverpool and across the country. Without a sustainable funding solution, we risk reversing the real progress that has been achieved in developing nursery schools as a beacon of early years education. I urge the Minister to listen to those concerns and, when he responds to the debate, to reassure our nursery schools that they have the opportunity for sustainable funding in the long term. They need to know that they can offer places in good faith, confident that their funding will not be cut next April. If that happens, it will make a real difference to the communities that I and other Members represent.

We need to work together on a cross-party basis to say to the Department for Education and to the Treasury, as my hon. Friend rightly said, that we do need a sustainable funding settlement that acknowledges that nursery schools have a special status in early years because they are schools, meaning that they have higher costs and play a distinct role in the early years sector. Most importantly, they are drivers of social mobility, and key players in tackling poverty and inequality. That is why there is such strong cross-party support for the motion and for the principle that nursery schools must be sustained for the long term.

2.56 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg). Given that we are on opposite sides of the House there are many issues on which we disagree, but I very much endorse his comments on the importance of early years education. Like him, I point out that the research is very clear that those who fall behind in the first five years of life find it very difficult to catch up. Ensuring we have the best possible quality early years education is, as many hon. Members have stated, a hugely important engine of social mobility. That is at the heart of what we are discussing this afternoon: how we as a society ensure that we provide a good start in life, which comes with really high quality early years education.

Like other hon. Members, I would like to commend some of the maintained nursery schools in my constituency—Hampden Way, St Margaret’s and Brookhill. They have come together through the Barnet Early Years Alliance, or BEYA as it is known. They are given inspirational leadership by the headteacher Caron Rudge and huge support from their boards of governors, including the chair of governors, Liz Pearson. I would like to thank Mrs Pearson and Mrs Rudge for their briefing and their work on this crucial issue of finding a sustainable future for the maintained sector and ensuring that BEYA and its component schools have a secure future. I thank all my constituents who signed the petitions to save the maintained nursery sector, particularly those wonderful schools in my Chipping Barnet community. I look forward to presenting them formally alongside other colleagues next week.

It is very clear that the maintained nursery sector has particular strength in relation to the most vulnerable children in our society, those with special education needs and disabilities. They have a hugely valuable pool of experience and expertise. Losing such experience and expertise would have significant knock-on effects, both financial and social. Like others, I would like to emphasise that in coming together to find a sustainable future for
the maintained nursery sector, support for children with special educational needs and disabilities must be at the heart of that.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making some very clear points about the support that nursery schools in her constituency give, especially to those with special educational needs. In my constituency, I also have two excellent maintained nursery schools. I want to mention the Tanglewood Nursery School, which specialises in young children with speech and language challenges. It helps not only the children in its own school, but with other pre-school organisations right across Essex. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we lost that support in our maintained nursery schools, it would risk knock-on impacts for others in other pre-school environments nearby?

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point. I was going to come to that in my speech. We must find a long-term, sustainable role for the maintained nursery schools in the constituencies of everybody who has spoken. They are potentially beacons of excellence, centres of training and places that have an impact on the whole locality, in terms of raising standards in the pre-school sector. That is an important part of the solution.

We all recognise that there are limits to what the taxpayer can afford, and it is vital that we take care when deploying taxpayers' funding. We must ensure it is used appropriately. One of the most difficult things for a Government to do is to assess which priorities can be funded and which cannot. As others have said, the funding situation for the maintained sector is becoming very grave, so we must find a solution that saves those schools. Local authorities simply cannot fill the gap, as their funding is under pressure, too, because of the continuing consequences of the very serious deficit that we inherited from the previous Labour Government. Although many local authorities across the country, including my own in Barnet, are doing their best to find ways of supporting the maintained sector, that will not be a solution on its own.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): The right hon. Lady just referred to a deficit left by the previous Government, but does she agree that funding nursery schools should be a higher priority than giving wealthy people tax cuts?

Theresa Villiers: Of course, funding for nursery schools should be a priority, and I am here to make the case for that. We also need a competitive tax system, and reductions in corporation tax, for example, have led to increased revenue. There is a balance to be struck. We need a competitive economy that attracts investment, and reasonable levels of business taxation are an important part of that. They help to generate the revenue that funds our schools. I do not agree with the sentiment of all of what the hon. Lady said.

BEYA has not stood still and failed to take action. It has gone to great lengths to carve out a new role for itself and has looked for other sources of funding. It is working with children's centres and on training programmes, but it is still in great difficulty. Frankly, a crunch is coming for its funding and that of other maintained nursery schools. If nothing is done, the threat of closure will become greater and greater. That is why I am here today to appeal to the Minister.

My understanding is that, when the transitional funding was announced a few years ago—I am grateful that the Government chose to do that—it was supposed to give the maintained sector a breathing space, during which time the Government would work with it to develop a new, sustainable role for it. Essentially, as I have already adverted to, nursery schools would become centres of excellence, beacons for the surrounding area and centres of training. That would ensure that they play an outstanding role in the wider early years sector and provide support across the whole range of early years providers. The idea was to provide temporary transitional funding until that new role was settled to put the maintained sector on a sustainable footing for the future.

Time is now running out, and, like others, I appeal to the Minister for an extension of that transitional funding for settlement of that new role to secure the long-term future of the maintained sector and the children whose lives it transforms, and to ensure that in the spending review there is space to save these wonderful schools that so many Members have talked about this evening with such warmth and praise. I believe that this is the important next step to take: first, an extension of the transitional funding; secondly, an agreement on the long-term role of the nursery sector; and, thirdly, a recognition in the spending review that we need to fund these schools for the long term.

3.5 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing the debate through the Backbench Business Committee. It has been a well-tempered discussion so far, but I have to say that I am pretty angry about what is happening so I may introduce one or two notes of rancour I am afraid.

In my area there are four maintained nursery schools: Brunswick, the Fields, Homerton and the Colleges. I know all of them well, and whenever I visit I am struck, as other Members have said of their nurseries, by the genuine care and dedication of the staff, who provide an excellent start. I am particularly struck by the support and engagement of parents and I am always struck by the messy play, but unfortunately I am also struck by the real sense of worry about the future because of the threat that future funding will not be secured.

As we have heard, the costs that these nurseries incur are higher, and in a high cost area such as Cambridge it is particularly expensive to hire staff so they are under huge pressure. That of course applies to all nurseries across the sector in Cambridge, but as we have heard the maintained nurseries have particular extra costs, because they are providing something different, because they are schools. Sometimes I do wonder whether the Government entirely grasp this point.

To say that funding streams and accountability within this sector are opaque barely does justice to the complexity. As we all know, this Government have, as usual, made promises on things such as 30 hours and then failed to provide the resources, so passing the buck to local
councils who then all too frequently get the blame. As a result, providers within the sector all too easily end up pitted one against another when what we really need is everyone working together to achieve a shared goal: good quality, universal early-years provision with properly trained, well rewarded staff.

Sadly, we are a long way from that. In Cambridgeshire, providers are paid just £4.04 an hour to provide care. The Department for Education has confirmed that it will not provide an uplift in the hourly funding rate from 2019-20, so our nurseries will only receive a 1p rise, to £4.05 an hour. And as we have heard, after April 2020 there has been no guarantee that any supplementary funding will be received for maintained nurseries: no word from the Government about future funding. So these excellent providers, so loved by parents and children, struggle on with a sword of Damocles hanging over them as they battle to cover the high costs of running a service in an expensive city, and now are given no certainty over their futures. This affects hundreds of children, hundreds of families, and of course, many staff.

Sadly, this anxiety surrounding the plight of our nurseries’ funding is not a recent phenomenon; it has almost become a way of life. Very early on in my time in this House I was at the Fields nursery, working with anxious staff and parents over how their future would be secured. In 2017 I delivered a petition on this very subject in this Chamber, and over the years I have repeatedly asked Ministers about this and warned of the approaching cliff edge; time and again I have been told, “It’s all in hand and there isn’t a problem,” but that really is not true in Cambridge and, what is worse, staff have had to go on working week after week, month after month, year after year without any certainty. Frankly, it is a disgrace: the Government should hang their head in shame at the stress and distress their dereliction of responsibility has caused so many people. Austerity might have been a nice parlour game for Osborne and Cameron—a nice bit of political triangulation—but it has caused untold damage and harm, tearing at the fabric of society, and the maintained nursery sector is a particular victim. Frankly, no one should ever forgive the Conservatives for these self-obsessions. Just as it is with the European Union, so it is with austerity: it is always about internal ideological battles and never about the public good.

In the latest round of this long-running saga, the most recent Minister has said that nurseries and local authorities should hold off from making decisions until after the spending review. Well, great. In the current chaos, without any certainty about when the spending review will even take place, that is frankly hopeless.

Vicky Ford: I should like to declare an interest, in that about 10 years ago, prior to coming to this place, I chaired a pre-school just outside the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. The pre-schools that are not maintained nursery schools receive less funding per head than the maintained nurseries. How does he justify to parents that their child who attends one of those excellent pre-schools is getting less Government funding per head than a child in a maintained nursery school?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s clarification, but I have to say that, from where some of us are sitting, on this side of the House, that looks exactly like what this Government are intending, in a far wider range of sectors than just the early years sector.

I shall return to the spending review. It is expected in the autumn but, as we have heard, that will be too late for many people. Businesses, local authorities and families need to plan, and they need costed commitments, not empty promises. It is wholly irresponsible to continue to drag out this uncertainty regarding supplementary funding. The Local Government Association tells us that 61% of local authorities with maintained nursery schools fear that their nursery schools will close if their funding is not protected, and 52% say that the loss of that funding will reduce the support available for children with special educational needs; and let us not even start on the crisis affecting that group. Pretending that the current funding is sustainable is an utter fantasy, which is perhaps no surprise from a Government who seem every day to demonstrate that they live in a fantasy world of unicorns. That is fine for nursery stories, but a hopeless way how not to run a country.

This week I was handed a petition, as others have been, from thousands of concerned parents across Cambridge who are calling for better funding and stability for our maintained nurseries. Many of them added extra comments, and they make heart-warming reading. Both the Brunswick and the Colleges Nursery Schools in Cambridge were recently rated outstanding across the board by Ofsted, with comments reflecting on the nurseries’ “high quality care”, “inspirational leadership” and “strong teaching”. Parents commented that their nursery had been a “fundamental fixed point in our lives”, and “extremely supportive” to special educational needs and English as an additional language needs, and that it had helped their children to grow in “confidence, understanding and care for others”.

Are these really the kinds of services that this Government want to destroy?
Under the current funding agreement, nurseries will struggle to stay in business, according to the Department for Education’s own figures. When I visited one of the nurseries recently I was told that, without extra help, it will hit the buffers next April. How depressing, when we know that for every £1 spent on early years, £13 are saved down the line. The Chancellor has announced that his spring statement will take place in March, and I and others will be very disappointed if the Minister here today does not use the next few weeks to make serious representations on this matter, ahead of those announcements. I have had angry words for the Government today, and frankly I think they are deserved. Our maintained nurseries deserve better, and I hope that the Minister will prove me wrong and show that the Government have some sense after all.

3.14 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I start by declaring an interest and by congratulating the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this debate. I supported the application and will certainly be supporting the petitions next week, with one from the nursery school in my constituency that I mentioned earlier.

Thursday afternoons are becoming like a “children’s hour” session, which is fantastic. I said two weeks ago when I opened the debate on children’s social care that we do not have enough time in this place to talk about important issues such as those facing children. We have a lot of childish debates on other topics, but we should be doing more on children and young people. A few Thursdays ago, we had an important, well-informed, emotional debate on baby loss. These are the issues that resonate with and are important to our constituents and their children on a day-to-day basis. It is to be applauded that we have strong interest in this afternoon’s debate and that we have a degree of consensus.

I am disappointed, however, with the politicisation in some Opposition Members’ speeches, because the Government want quality education for all. We can only pay for that quality education by having a strong economy and taxpayers who are in a position to pay tax. Hounding some out of the country does not provide resources to invest in education at any level and we need to balance that. Trying to make this into a political issue or to suggest that there is some ulterior motive—

Karen Lee: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Loughton: I will not. Trying to suggest that the Government have some ulterior motive to run down what we all absolutely acknowledge is an essential part of the education system does not help anyone, frankly. I want to carry on with a more consensual approach about how to find a solution to the looming problem of sustainability of funding for these excellent nursery schools, which is the subject of this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and I each have a maintained nursery school in our constituencies. West Sussex only has four, so we have 50% of the county’s maintained nursery schools between us. What the schools share is quality and engagement with the local community. Boundstone Nursery School, which has been in existence for many years in one of the more deprived parts of my constituency and is run by an inspirational, exceedingly hard-working, determined headteacher in Jim Brannan, is co-located with other children’s centre services. The services have recently been rationalised into a new single service that provides an aged zero-to-25 prevention and early help service, integrating specialist county council teams with health visitors, school nurses and others. The site provides a one-stop shop for many of the services wanted by my constituents who use and need a maintained nursery school. Long may that continue.

I pay tribute to West Sussex County Council. We have many arguments about how many children’s centres have closed, but no children and family centres in West Sussex have closed. However, this is not a numbers game. This is about the quality of the services that are offered in children’s centres, the success of the level of engagement with the people who most need it, and the outcomes for those children and the families who engage with such services.

We still have many children’s centres that are often closed for too much of the week. The most successful centres, whether they are co-located with nurseries or whatever, need to be open in the evenings and at weekends. They need to be more father-friendly, and we had a debate on a similar topic in Westminster Hall yesterday. We need to make centres more welcoming, flexible and amenable so that, wherever possible, fathers can bring their kids to the nurses and engage with them, the support services and extracurricular activities that are on offer just as much as mums can. This is not about quantity, but quality, the extent of the engagement and the level of the outcomes. We need to make centres busier. In West Sussex we have also integrated them with what we call “Think Family,” which is one of the country’s best versions of the troubled families programme. The Minister has a strong interest in these areas, and he appreciates the importance of getting it right, so I re-emphasise the need to make sure that the Treasury rolls over the funding for the troubled families programme, which comes to an end in 2020. The programme has been a template for how joined-up, sensible preventive thinking prevents an awful lot of problems later on.

Maintained nurseries are an important part of the jigsaw at an important and impressionable stage of a child’s life and a new parent’s life. This can be a lonely and daunting time, and a nursery can be part of a new parent’s support network. I pay tribute to the immense amount of work and investment the Government have put into the free childcare offer, although not without problem; not enough fully to remunerate the cost of this in the independent sector. We are seeing the impact in the maintained sector, too.

Maintained nurseries are the gold standard, which is why so many more of them are rated outstanding, including the Boundstone nursery in my constituency. That is not to undermine the independent sector, but the standards of maintained nurseries are consistently higher. Maintained nurseries have to invest in provision for special educational needs and disability support because, as many hon. Members have mentioned, they are effectively schools, and they take on many of the kids who cannot be adequately catered for in alternative provision elsewhere. Maintained nurseries are doing a more universal job than many other high-quality players in the sector are able to perform.
I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on conception to age two—the first 1,001 days. I am also the chairman of trustees at Parent Infant Partnership UK, and we run professional services in children and family centres across the country to work with new parents, often single parents, who have attachment problems with their children. Those first 1,001 days from conception to age two are where we can have the maximum bang for our buck in giving the support that has not come, for whatever reason, between a parent/carer and his or her child.

The more we can do to get it right then, the bigger the savings financially and, much more importantly, socially in how that child will consequently become a contributing, balanced, stable member of society later in life. That work is crucial, and it is a false economy not to do it. The cost of getting perinatal mental health wrong is estimated at more than £8 billion a year, and the cost of child neglect is estimated at £15 billion a year. That is one hell of a bill for getting it wrong. Maintained nurseries are part of the solution and can prevent some of those children from ending up in those other ancillary services.

That is why I asked whether a proper audit has been done. If we reduce the places or the quality available in maintained nurseries, because some of them might have to consider their future if the funding is not confirmed and maintained, there will be a knock-on effect on safeguarding services. Maintained nurseries can act as an early-warning system where there are safeguarding problems or parenting problems within a family. Good nurseries are not just for the children who attend each day; they support the parents as well. Nurseries reduce the costs for health, wellbeing and disability services.

As I mentioned earlier, nurseries offer respite for parents looking after profoundly disabled children. Those parents can be confident that their children will be safe and properly looked after, and the nurseries provide a strong respite facility that may be the difference in whether a child is able to stay in the family home.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you are looking at me with concern, so I finish by saying that we need to do our best to make sure that these maintained nurseries continue as they are. For that, we have to give them certainty. When this protected funding comes to an end in 2019-20, we will be burning a little less brightly because we have not got it right. We will be reaping the consequences of that in years to come and those children will be reaping the consequences of the false economy that not doing that represents.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. Just before I call the next speaker, I am anxious to ensure that everybody has a good time slot and so I urge hon. Members to take 10 minutes and no more. In that way, we will be able to get everybody in and they will be able to have an equal amount of time.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on leading this debate, and I am pleased to be following the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who has a distinguished record in this area. I do not agree with him that we ought not to be criticising the Government, because it is a shocking state of affairs that schools are having to make decisions about which children they will offer places to in September, three months before the start of the next school year, and they do not know what their budget is going to be for next year. That may not be the fault of the Minister on the Front Bench today, but it certainly is the fault of the Government and it is absolutely right for Parliament to point that out.

In 1984, I become a councillor in the Little Ilford ward in my constituency, and I became a governor of Sheringham Nursery School—Sheringham Nursery School and Children’s Centre, as it now is—in that ward. I have known the school for 35 years, in which time it has had two headteachers. Maureen Haynes was the young head there when I became a governor, and she carried on until her retirement, with her successor being Dr Julian Grenier. The school has done a fantastic job throughout that time. Of course, it benefited immensely from the investment by the Government from 1997 to 2010, when early years was a high priority. Sheringham was expanded, for example, from one storey to two. These days, I regularly hold surgeries there, and it is clear that it is more than a school; as my hon. Friend described at the start, it is a hub for the community, where people can look for support with parenting and with other challenges they are facing.

Sheringham has lots of admirers, as is the case with most maintained nursery schools, as we have been reminded. Ofsted designated it as outstanding five years ago. Three months ago, Ofsted carried out a short inspection, and I just want to read the opening of the subsequent letter sent to the headteacher about what the inspection team found. I apologise for the sense of pride I feel about the support that is being provided in my constituency. Ofsted said this:

“The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education in the school since the last inspection.”

You and your staff have ensured that the nursery provision continues to be of exceptionally high quality. Leaders are extremely knowledgeable and passionate about early years education. All staff are well trained and have a thorough understanding of how young children learn and develop. The nursery is a calm, orderly and well-organised environment. Children’s behaviour is outstanding. Children learn how to share resources, join in activities and make the most of their education in the school since the last inspection.

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It continued:

“Your role as a national teaching school enables you to share the expertise in early years education with other local providers. Leaders and staff have forged strong links with private nursery settings and local primary schools to deliver professional development for their staff.”

Those last couple of sentences highlight how Sheringham supports private nurseries in the nurseries in the area as well, so that the number of children and families who benefit is much greater than the number who attend that school. It is a Greater London Authority early
years hub and it supports more than 100 private and voluntary nurseries. That is an important point to underline. The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) asked the pertinent question: why do these schools cost more? The fact that they support others is an important part of the reason why.

Let me read one more paragraph from that Ofsted letter:

“Children are encouraged to be independent learners. Adults intervene skilfully when needed to support their learning but do not interfere unnecessarily. The levels of interaction between adults and children is exceptionally high. As a result...two-year-olds make very strong progress from low starting points. This exceptional start gives them an excellent foundation for the next stage of their education and beyond.”

All that is now under threat because of the uncertainty over funding. Decisions must be made soon about which children to admit to Sheringham next September, and throughout London to the other 79 maintained nursery schools in 24 of the 33 London boroughs. Nursery schools cannot make those decisions until they know whether the current funding will last until the summer term of 2020. At the moment, they do not have a clue.

As the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said in her speech, the supplementary funding was supposed to be just a stopgap until a long-term solution was put in place, but there is still not even a proposal for a long-term solution. Schools are making admissions decisions now without knowing whether they will still be funded beyond halfway through the next school years. Those that are in deficit cannot adopt deficit reduction plans because they do not know what their income is going to be in 2020.

It is of course the case that maintained nursery schools are more costly than other provision. That is partly because the law requires them, as schools, to have several specified postholders, and it is partly because, like Sheringham, they support other private and voluntary nurseries as well, but it is also because they disproportionately support children with special educational needs and disability. Sheringham has 68 children with SEND—more than a third of the total roll—including 10 children with high needs. Other settings simply could not support those children. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham was absolutely right to make the point about these nursery schools being a safe place for children like that to go. The loss of that support for those children would be catastrophic.

London Councils points out that as well as employing specialist teachers who can recognise SEND early and develop plans to ensure that children with SEND are supported and ready for school when the time comes, maintained nursery schools play a crucial role in social mobility. They prioritise working with the most disadvantaged children and provide high-quality teaching and support that helps to narrow the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. I think we all recognise how important that is. London Councils reports that maintained nursery schools in more than a third of the London boroughs may be threatened with closure if the ring-fenced funding that has supported them for the past three years is not maintained beyond next March. The majority of headteachers interviewed for research that was published by London Councils in September said that they would have to start turning away pupils with more complex needs unless more funding was secured.

The Minister has recognised publicly and sincerely the value of the contribution made by maintained nursery schools. If he needs any further convincing, a visit to Sheringham in my constituency, just 45 minutes away, would certainly do the trick. I am sure he recognises the importance of confirming that funding will continue and I urge him to make sure that it does.

3.34 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I often say that Erdington is rich in talent, but it is one of the poorest constituencies in the country. Here is a stark statistic that brings alive the awful problems associated with deprivation and poverty: if a man gets on the train at Grand Central—New Street—and gets off at either Gravelly Hill or Erdington station, he is likely to live seven years less than a man who continues on but two miles to Four Oaks in Sutton. The deeply ingrained patterns of inequality and poverty are fundamentally wrong. The key to tackling them is social mobility, giving every child the best possible start in life, and the key to giving every child the best possible start in life is our 400 nursery schools up and down the country.

I suspect that all of us here have heard both the heart-breaking and the heart-warming stories. I remember a weeping mother who came to see me in my surgery with her sad and silent child. He was struggling and she was desperate, saying, “Where do I turn? Where do I turn?” I remember also the heart-warming stories. At Osborne Nursery School, I will never forget the grandfather who told me a story. He said, “Jack, he wouldn’t string two words together. He was silent. He sat in a corner. He went to the nursery school and, a year later, we can’t shut him up.”

Let me tell another story, which, for me, brings the whole matter alive. Sally Leese, the headteacher of Castle Vale Nursery School, told me that, with increasingly little support available, partly as a consequence of the closure of children’s centres, more and more health visitors are coming to nursery schools asking them to accept children no one else will take. She told me this story: “A health visitor called me before Christmas about two little boys, aged four and two. They had been on a child protection plan since they were born. Neither could speak and both were still in nappies. The health visitor said that they were the saddest little boys she had ever seen, and when I met them, I agreed. We took the boys in and gave them unfunded full-time places and undertook many nurture sessions. The health visitor came to the school the other day to thank me as she had just done a home visit and said that the change in them was incredible. She said that she had worked with them for more than a year, but that this was the first time they had spoken to her, smiled and laughed. She cried when she told me. Who else would have taken these boys for no money?” She told me of the health visitors and the social workers who keep phoning to say, “You never say no to a child, no matter what the situation is.”

I pay tribute to those four remarkable nursery schools in Erdington: Osborne with its headteacher, Sharon Eeles; Castle Vale with its headteacher, Sally Leese;
Featherstone with its headteacher, Elaine Dupree; and Marsh Hill with its headteacher, Helen Masaun. The job they do in an area of high poverty is nothing short of remarkable—they transform lives.

Three years ago, we had a funding crisis. There was a nationwide campaign, with nursery schools, parents and grandparents all coming together. Ultimately, that led to the formation of the all-party group, which is brilliantly led by the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). It is very much an all-party group. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for the role that he plays. Different parties have come together to speak as one in support of our nursery schools. We have made real progress.

I never forget that the first meeting of the all-party group was so big that it had to take place in Central Hall, Westminster. Six hundred people were present. The average attendance of the APPG is 300. It meets regularly, hearing, on the one hand, heart-warming stories of progress made, and, on the other, heart-breaking stories of the growing concern of our nursery schools about the future.

Transitional funding of £59 million was won, and that was very welcome indeed, but now nursery schools seeking to plan ahead are in limbo. I know that nobody here needs to be convinced about why our nursery schools matter, but let me simply say this: they do indeed transform lives, with 64% of them in the most deprived parts of our country; they are overwhelmingly rated outstanding by Ofsted; and they prioritise those in the greatest need, and, with their unique pool of expertise, they help children with SEND. Everyone benefits, because one of the characteristics of the 27 nursery schools in Birmingham is that they work with private voluntary and independent nurseries, raising standards across the whole sector. Yes, they cost more, but they are worth every penny. In the immortal words of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), they are schools, not babysitting. They are schools in the best sense of the word.

I was struck by the very good contribution of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who said that were that money, which is not much in the great scheme of things, not to be there—were there to be potential catastrophe for our nursery schools—the downstream costs to the public purse would be incalculable.

We cannot wait for the comprehensive spending review, because who knows when it will take place? Right now, nursery schools are having to plan ahead when it comes to thinking about how many places they can offer, setting budgets, and maintaining vital facilities and expertise. Indeed, there have already been some closures. Delay risks many more, and a failure to respond properly and on an adequate scale could mean a tidal wave of closures throughout the country. That would be utterly tragic.

I know that the Minister gets it. When the four heads to whom I referred met him, they were impressed by his sympathy, but it was not just about the sympathy—not just a cup of hot tea and biscuits. The Minister’s commitment came over to them and it was very welcome. The problem is not the Minister sitting here today; the problem lies in Downing Street, and Downing Street has to hear this message loud and clear. These nurseries are a great part of our national heritage, many of them dating back to the second world war. They are an essential part of tackling poverty and deprivation, and ensuring social mobility. A decision has to be made quickly, otherwise I fear for the future of the jewels in the crown of early years provision.

3.42 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). Like him, I have met the headteacher of the maintained nursery school in my constituency, and she also praised the Minister for his openness and willingness to listen. I hope that the Minister takes heed of those remarks. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for securing the debate, and for her expertise and hard work on this subject.

In my constituency of Heywood and Middleton, there is just one maintained nursery school left: Sunny Brow Nursery School in Middleton. I just want to say that my praise of the great work done by Sunny Brow Nursery should in no way be taken as a criticism of the other nursery providers in my constituency. I know how important childcare provision is and how valuable the service is to parents, employers and families. I would like to see all nursery provision being valued and an end brought to the minimum wage culture. We trust all nursery nurses with the care of our children. It is an important and responsible job, and should be remunerated as such.

Last week, I met Janet Cook, the headteacher of Sunny Brow Nursery, as well as the governors and parents, to discuss the dire funding situation facing the nursery. We also talked about the huge educational contribution and fantastic start in life that Sunny Brow has given to the children who attend it. The parents talked about how their previously shy and withdrawn children had blossomed in the atmosphere of Sunny Brow. One parent was guardian to a child who, sadly, suffered from foetal alcohol syndrome. She talked about how much the expert teaching at Sunny Brow had helped this child to prepare for primary school, in stark contrast to his two siblings with the same syndrome who had not had the benefit of attending a maintained nursery school and both struggled when they entered mainstream schooling, with many breaks and problems in their subsequent school careers that could and should have been addressed in the early years—the most important years in anyone’s education.

Sunny Brow employs graduate class teachers to provide the excellent care and education from which these children benefit and on which they thrive. Yet the future of the nursery is uncertain due to the lack of clarity over what will happen when the Government top-up fund comes to an end in April 2020. The headteacher told me that unless another source of funding becomes available, Sunny Brow, which has provided early years education in Middleton since the second world war, will no longer be able to operate and will be forced to close. We cannot allow this to happen. We know how important early years education is. This is supported by the Government’s own studies, which show that those from poorer backgrounds are likely to benefit more from education and care from the age of two.
The 30 hours’ childcare costs have helped to put extra pressure on maintained nursery schools’ budgets, as they do not get all the funding back for the 30 hours. This is an additional pressure for Sunny Brow, coupled with the uncertainty of its future post April 2020.

Sunny Brow serves a catchment area of pupils that includes many with specialist needs and disadvantaged backgrounds. With my constituency only 395th out of 533 parliamentary constituencies in the recently published “Social Mobility Index”, it is vital that we are able to maintain the high-quality early years provision provided at Sunny Brow Nursery. We should be celebrating the achievements of nurseries such as Sunny Brow, and their contribution to social mobility and closing the attainment gap, rather than letting them simply wither on the vine due to a lack of funding. Any Government who are serious about improving social mobility—I do believe that the Minister is serious about doing that—should be promoting the expansion of maintained nursery schools, especially into deprived areas like mine, not joining in a race to the bottom. I wish the Minister the best of luck in putting pressure on the Treasury to release funding for this vital service. He can rely on support from Labour Members in so doing.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this important debate and her committed work on such a vital issue. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes).

I am a proud advocate for nursery schools in Lincoln. I have been contacted by two maintained nurseries in Lincoln, St Giles and Kingsdown, about the precarious position of their funding after April 2020. Currently, nursery schools are unable to plan and budget for the future, and headteachers and families are deeply concerned. A couple of weeks ago, I met the headteacher of St Giles. She had previously written to me, with the support of the parents, the staff and the surrounding local community, to express their fears about the supplementary funding settlement post 2020. We talked for an hour and a half, and I could really see her concern—she is very worried about what they might lose. This problem is not restricted to Lincoln, as Members on both sides of the House have raised concerns regarding nurseries in their own constituencies.

Let us not overlook the immediate threat. Nurseries are already struggling to set budgets, as even before the end of supplementary funding, 64% expect to be in budget deficit. This is very worrying, as last year the LGA found that 61% of local authorities with maintained nursery schools fear that their schools will close if funding is not protected after 2020, with 52% saying that a loss of funding would reduce the support available for children with SEND.

Maintained nursery schools genuinely advance social mobility—that has been said again and again. The evidence is overwhelming. We know that 64% of maintained nurseries are in the 30% most deprived areas. The two in Lincoln are both in areas of marked social deprivation—Birchwood and St Giles. Regardless of one’s upbringing, we all deserve a good education, and their admission process prioritises children who are in greatest need. In a society with so much inequality, we must protect services that support vulnerable people and give them the opportunity to excel in later education. The Government have even accepted that maintained nurseries cost more, as they provide a range of early years provision.

Any planned cuts to funding of maintained nurseries presents an extremely short-term view of educational funding, and it is a false economy. A report by a group of seven maintained nurseries in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, where I am from, estimates that the cost to public sector services of those nurseries closing would be £216,000 to health and wellbeing services, £278,000 to special educational needs and disability services, £256,000 to social care safeguarding services and £480,000 to supplementing extended entitlement services. The benefits of these nurseries are clear. Maintained nursery schools provide vital support to our local communities, yet the Government failed to address nursery schools’ financial insecurity in the last Budget, and the forecasted review in autumn 2019 is far too late. An issue that requires urgency is seemingly being responded to with complacency—and I do not include the Minister in that statement. I promised nurseries, teaching staff and parents in my constituency that I would be their voice in Parliament. They are not expecting anything out of the ordinary, but they do expect and deserve a sustainable financial future for maintained nursery schools, which will protect jobs and the opportunities of children in their communities.

Will the Minister explain to the House how he expects nursery schools to offer places in the spring of 2019 or the following school year when they know full well that no funding arrangement has been decided upon? I, too, understand that the Minister is sympathetic to the plight of our nurseries—his commitment is not doubted for a minute—but with the risk of closures on the horizon, how can the Government expect nurseries to continue in good faith without a forward-looking, secure financial plan?

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee). I want to associate myself with a number of the comments made by Opposition Members and some Government Members. This excellent debate has highlighted the huge social value of nursery education.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi) indicated assent.

Matt Rodda: I see the Minister nodding. I am grateful for his interest in this subject, and we all wish him well in his battle with the Treasury to secure the needed funds.

Many Members have talked about the significant social value and budgets of these nurseries. We have heard emotional descriptions of the value of nursery education. I realise that time is pressing, so I will draw the Minister’s attention to the three maintained nursery schools in Reading East and, on behalf of the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), the two in Reading West. They are all outstanding maintained nursery schools.
The three nurseries in Reading East—Caversham, New Bridge and Blagdon—have all been rated as outstanding in their Ofsted reports. I would like to describe to the Minister what it is like to walk into those nurseries. What we find is a calm, ordered and pleasant environment where very young children are starting to learn, often through play. It is incredibly positive, upbeat and supportive, and these are some of the most disadvantaged children in our local community. I know well the Amersham estate, which serves Caversham Nursery. New Bridge Nursery serves an area nearby, and Blagdon serves an area in south Reading. There are considerable challenges for many families in those areas, and Members have described those challenges.

I would like to warn the Minister in a supportive way of what could happen in Reading if funding is not sorted out for these three nursery schools. We have already seen severe financial pressure affecting the three nursery schools in Reading East and the two in the western side of the town. My concern is that, if the issues are not addressed, we may see serious challenges as a result of continuing financial pressure. One possible way of solving the financial pressures that has been suggested is the bringing together of the maintenance team. Given that these schools are across quite a wide area, in a borough with severe traffic problems and a great deal of congestion, it would be extremely difficult for one leader, however able, to lead all five nursery schools.

I wish to pass on to the Minister the practical challenges in our borough, which is a small unitary authority. It has a number of other educational challenges, which I will come on to later. It will face challenges if the nursery schools have to go down this route. As I am sure he is only too aware, Ofsted has pointed out for many years the overwhelming importance of strong leadership in turning round underperformance in educational institutions, whether they are nursery schools, schools or other institutions, and taking them forward to achieve the highest results and most outstanding education. I raise that as a serious local concern. I know the headteacher of one of the nursery schools well. She, like her colleagues, is an outstanding public servant. I wish them well, and I want to see that team enhanced and developing, and the ordinary staff retained.

I want to give some of the context for Reading because it helps us to understand the particular pressure caused by the combination of deprivation and a high-cost area. It can be a very worrying combination for nursery schools and other parts of the public sector. As the Minister may know, in the Thames Valley and other high-cost areas—I do not dispute that many other parts of England, Wales and the rest of the UK face the same challenge—we have significant challenges in recruiting and retaining public sector professionals. In education, that is particularly felt. We also have a large growth in the school-age population. In the part of the borough of Reading that I represent, in the last few years, two new primary and two new secondary schools have been established. A further new secondary school will be established in the near future.

So the basic need is high, and the pressure and difficulty of retaining skilled staff is high. We also face the additional challenge that we are not within London or the outer London weighting area, so a teacher might work just down the road in Bracknell or Slough, which also have real social challenges, yet the housing costs there are much lower than in Reading or indeed Oxford. I should like to draw that to the Minister's attention and meet him to have a thorough discussion about these long-term pressures, as would some of my colleagues. I would appreciate the Minister's allowing me to address him directly on this issue.

Today's debate should have a real impact, based on the Minister's reaction, which I acknowledge. As we have heard, our nursery schools are a vital asset to our community. I urge the Minister to do everything that he can to raise this point with the Treasury. Is it possible to have a meeting to discuss the particular issues affecting certain parts of the country that are outside areas where there is additional funding for recruitment and retention?

3.57 pm
Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda). Like others, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this debate and chairing the excellent all-party parliamentary group, which I know many people from Bristol have come here to engage with. While I can, before the summing up, I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), who on the Front Bench has been a consistent champion for us on the Back Benches on this issue.

As a new Member of Parliament, I have spent the majority of my time talking about Brexit. This debate reminds that one of the reasons I wanted to become an MP in the first place was not to debate the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice but to help tackle the issues of poverty and help people from my constituency have the best chances in life. I am sure that every hon. Member, but especially Labour Members, came into politics to help tackle the root causes of poverty, and we know that early education plays a significant role in increasing social mobility for the people we represent.

Indeed, one of the Labour legacies—which include the national minimum wage, lifting 900,000 children out of poverty, and, much too late in our time in office sadly, the introduction of children's centres—of which I am most proud as a Labour Member is that under the Blair and Brown Governments higher education was opened up for people like me from families in which no one had never been to university before. That had such an impact on the life chances of many people with whom I grew up and now represent in my constituency of Bristol North West. That is why I am so proud of what my Labour colleagues in Bristol City Council are doing today. Under the excellent leadership of Councillor Helen Godwin, the cabinet member for children, women and young people, and lead member for children's services, they have worked hard, in difficult financial circumstances, not only to fund and maintain nursery schools, but to keep every child's centre open. They have been innovative in bringing children's centres on site together with nursery schools to provide a range of comprehensive early years provision for families who require different levels of support and different access. The centres can then be funnelled into the maintained nursery school system to help those young people as they progress to primary schools.

I should say on behalf of my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and for Bristol South (Karin
Smyth)—all of whom I know wanted to be here today—that we are united in our support and praise for the members of Bristol City Council, and in our desire to champion their case here in Westminster.

Bristol has a fine legacy of maintained nursery schools. I should declare my interest: I benefited from going to one—Bluebell Valley in Lawrence Weston, which is where I was born and which is in my constituency. Sadly, Lawrence Weston is still one of the most deprived communities in the country in respect of education, training and skills, so this is an emotional as well as a professional issue for me. I still see so many young people who deserve a better chance in life. That is at the heart of all this, which is why we are all so passionate about securing sustainable funding for maintained nursery schools and for early provision more generally: we know the difference that it will make.

We have already heard, in all the excellent contributions to the debate, the detailed requests and comments on policy that the Minister has been asked to convey to the Treasury, so I will not go through them again. Let me, however, mention Jackie McGregor, the headteacher of the excellent Filton Avenue nursery school in Lockleaze, in my constituency. I have met her on a number of occasions, and she is clearly practised in trying to keep the whole thing together in the face of cuts and changes—changes in policy, and organisational change. However, she and Sally Jaeckle, the Bristol City Council’s head of early years services, feel that this may be the last straw. They do not know whether they can keep the school going without a commitment from the Treasury for sustainable funding after 2020. It really rings alarm bells when people who are so well versed in having to maintain excellent provision in the face of local funding cuts say to me, “Darren, we think that this is just one step too far: it is just going to be too hard.”

Before my election, I was the chair of governors at the primary school that I had attended a few decades earlier, which is now called Nova primary school. I saw at first hand the huge job that primary schools have to do in trying to bring young people up to the average by the time they reach year 6 if, owing to their backgrounds and environments, they enter the reception class with below-average basic skills. Often, when children go to secondary school and there is less support per pupil, they start to fall back. That is one of the structural challenges in the inequality of educational outcomes, but it can be sorted out fundamentally by maintained nursery school provision. Hard work needs to be done before children enter the reception class. I know from my first-hand experience as a governor about the need to go through all the progress charts and figures and track every pupil in a primary school. I know about the impact on not only those young people but their families, now and in the future.

Let me end by restating the request that has been made. I thank the Minister for corresponding with me on this issue regularly, and in a very positive manner. I know that he is with us in this cause, but I add my voice—and those of my hon. Friends across Bristol—to the increasing list of supporters for his request to the Treasury for sustainable funding for our maintained nursery schools. Many Members have mentioned the petition. In Bristol it has been signed by parents, teachers and members of the community who are very concerned about this issue, and it will be presented next week. I wish the Minister Godspeed, and, as others have said, if there is anything that we can do to help him to sort out the funding, we are here with him.

4.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on setting the scene so well. As always, I want to introduce a Northern Ireland perspective. I know that the title of the debate covers maintained nursery schools in the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but those who have spoken so far have spoken specifically about England and about their own knowledge. I want to speak about my knowledge of Northern Ireland, and also to speak as a father of three boys who went to nursery schools. I want to talk about the benefits that that experience brought them. That, I think, is in the spirit of the debate, and of what we are trying to prove to the Minister, if we need to do so. I think he is already on our side anyway, and I think he understands the importance of the issue.

The provision of nursery care is essential to the development of children, and also to the sustainability of working families. Without nursery care, maintained or otherwise, many parents would not both be able to work, and so they help to sustain working families, as has come out in this debate. Employers for Childcare, in the findings of its ninth annual childcare costs survey, has revealed that the average cost of a full-time childcare place in Northern Ireland is £166 per week, which is a massive amount of money for anyone and underlines the issue. I am sure it is as much of an issue in other hon. Members’ constituencies, and probably in some cases even more of an issue, although the difference in Northern Ireland is that wages are lower and therefore the cost in percentage terms is greater.

The survey revealed a slight decrease on the previous year, reflecting the fact that many childcare providers sought not to increase their fees, knowing that if they did many people would drift away. That said, affordability remains a critical issue. For two thirds of families, the childcare bill is the biggest or second biggest monthly outgoing, and so maintained nursery schools are critical.

I recently heard two mothers chatting about childcare at an event. One said to the other, “Well, it changes when they get to nursery, so hold on for another two years”. For many families struggling through this time of paying childcare while working the knowledge that they get a paid place for a morning or an afternoon makes a difference. We must ensure this continues in the maintained nursery sector.

The cost of childcare is a concern for many parents. All three to four-year-olds are now entitled to 30 hours of free childcare per week. This free education can take place in nurseries, playgroups, pre-schools or with childminders. The 30 hours are free for 38 weeks in the year—in line with term time—and are essential for families to survive.

Much of what hon. Members have said today resonates with me. The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) referred to the things that happen in nursery schools. They build character and personality. It is imperative that children get the benefit of this time with
trained professionals and others with an ability to interact positively with children. Nursery helps to build relationships, not only with children but with adults other than family members, and teaches children to play together and form strong relationships and friendships with other children. Where I live, it enables two communities to move closer together through their children and ultimately to build better relations between adults. I can see important benefits at that level.

Nursery instils social and communication skills and helps with other things such as learning to share and making friends, which go hand in hand. I recommend that hand-in-hand process as a reason for keeping them maintained. Children can begin to understand what sharing is and how to deal with situations by communicating and experiencing those new feelings. As fathers and mothers, we know how children sometimes fight over things they want. Nursery teaches them to share. From an early age, it can implant that thought in a child’s mind.

Research shows that spending time in pre-school or nursery education enhances a child’s development and stands them in good stead for starting school. My three boys attended nursery, and the friendships they built there continued into primary and second school and into their working lives. They are young men now—30, 28 and 25—and two of them are married. The youngest is not. I said to him one day, “Any young girls on the horizon?”, and he responded, “No, not at the moment”. I replied, “If you leave it as long as your dad, you’ve got another seven years until you get married”. He is 25, so hon. Members can work out how old I was when I got married.

Nursery plays an important role in building relationships and friendships that last from the age of three or four right through to the age of my eldest boy, who is 30. All early years education providers follow the early years foundation stage framework, which sets the standards they must meet to ensure children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe. Starting this framework in nursery or pre-school helps the next stage of learning when starting school. The EYFS is followed through into primary school and gives children the knowledge and skills needed to be ready for school and to progress through school life.

The benefits of nursery—others have said this, and I am going to say it as well—dictate that we as parliamentarians should prioritise it. There must be funding to secure places for every child in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and to ensure that every family has a nursery school at a reasonable distance to give their child a level playing field for starting school. I believe that we must also send the message to working parents that we want to help them to see the benefit of their hard hours of work. This is not just about the children alone; it is about the parents and about building family life as well. I see that as an important part of what I would like to see across the whole of the United Kingdom.

I support the hon. Member for Manchester Central and right hon. and hon. Members in retaining maintained nursery schools, the importance of which cannot be underlined enough. I very much look forward to the Minister’s response.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): This is my first time winding up a debate, and what an important debate it has been.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who is such an extraordinary supporter of maintained nursery schools and the early years sector more widely. Her campaigning and stewardship of the all-party group on nursery schools, nursery and reception classes so often leads the way—keeping us all informed, connected and up to date on the plight of maintained nursery schools. I have to say that some of the biggest meetings I have ever attended have been meetings that she has organised with campaigners from far and wide across the country.

My hon. Friend’s contribution raised some extraordinary and well-made points, but a couple stood out for me. One was her passion for change. She also said that this was “social vandalism of the worst kind”, that we must support the holistic approach delivered by the maintained nurseries sector and that it would be a “crying shame” to see it disappear.

We also heard from some passionate and dedicated MPs about their own communities, and about the sense of pride they felt when they visit and witness what goes on in maintained nurseries in their constituencies. The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) talked about risk taking, creativity and art, and how they build resilience in young people, but also about how the potential loss of staff is deeply concerning. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) talked about “Stay and Read”, the food that children take home and the work on speech and language. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) mentioned that the situation is very grave.

My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) had great pride in seeing how children have blossomed. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), the former children’s Minister. He talked about attachment and how important it is, the support for the troubled families programme and the work he does on fathers. I have also been working on fathers—try to get more men into the early years sector, to bring men into nurseries and to get more involved with their families.

As always, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) gave an extremely passionate and emotional speech, which moved a number of us to tears. He talked about a desperate mother with her two little boys getting support from the maintained nursery sector. He has done extraordinary work with campaigners and their fantastic petition. I know it has been sent to lots of Members, who I hope are sharing it. I also want quickly to mention my hon. Friends the Members for Lincoln (Karen Lee) and for Reading East (Matt Rodda),
who both talked about the need for sustainability and the educational challenges. I thank all Members who made short interventions.

One thing that really stands out across the whole House is the strength of feeling about our faith and belief in the maintained nursery sector. It has been a pretty consensual debate, but I accept that Members feel deeply passionate and angry about the situation— for good reason, I would say. Since becoming shadow early years Minister, I have been lucky to visit many places, including in Greenwich and Bradford. I know the Minister also makes many trips around the country to look at nurseries, including maintained nurseries. I am continually impressed by the passion, vision and leadership of the educators, the diversity of the pupils, and the quantifiable impact the nurseries have on children, primarily on those who have special needs and those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Maintained nursery schools are not the only section of the early years sector to do tremendous work—PVIs and childminders up and down the country do fantastic work—but we are here today to discuss maintained nursery schools, so it is worth reiterating their many merits. They are often viewed as the crème de la crème of early years and many Members have said exactly that in this debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central said, 63% of the schools are rated outstanding by Ofsted and the rest are good. The majority of maintained nursery schools are in the 30% most deprived areas in England. Their pupil selection policies support those in greatest need and tend to work hand in hand with local authorities, an element that has become more important as other services funded by local authorities have declined and local authority budgets have been slashed to the bone. In Kirklees alone, we have lost 60% of our funding since 2010.

That has an impact on SEND provision, which is becoming a greater challenge for the early years sector. Maintained nursery schools employ SENCOs, which mean they can provide for children what other settings simply do not have the resources or expertise to provide. A report by seven local authorities in Yorkshire and the Humber found that each school supports as many as 15 children with SEND, with many requiring education and healthcare plans. The same report found that the schools are increasingly accommodating children with complex life-affecting conditions who would usually attend a specialist setting. When maintained nursery schools become good at that, they find themselves supporting clusters of children with those particular needs, as well as those with extra needs. In short, where communities have maintained nursery schools, the quality of provision is improved either directly or through training networks. There are genuine hidden benefits that ease the pressures on other costly public services. Indeed, it is disappointing that so many communities are without these support networks. I would like to see more, but sadly at the moment it is more common to see a school under threat than it is to see a new school open.

Since 2010, we have lost about one in 10 maintained nursery schools; the number has fallen from 428 down to 394. To repeat what my hon. Friends have said, it is a crying shame that we are losing maintained nursery schools across the country. That is a loss to communities which impacts on other public services. I would be interested to hear from the Minister when he is on his feet whether any assessment has been made of the cost to the public purse when a maintained school closes its doors. Many of the benefits these settings deliver are hidden benefits. For example, one case from East Riding of Yorkshire found that closing four maintained nursery schools would mean four additional social workers would be needed to provide the equivalent preventive work alone.

The crux of what we are discussing today is the funding of maintained nursery schools. I would call it a funding crisis, because brilliant provision comes at a cost: wonderful premises; education for free; risk taking; work on communication, literacy and language; support for parents and children; qualified teachers in the classroom; work that goes beyond the walls of the maintained nursery into the community; providing food after school for children whose parents are struggling; children with additional needs supported; and parents helped with their parenting skills. None of that comes cheap. We have seen 1,000 Sure Start centres across the country close, and the maintained nursery sector is picking up a substantial amount of that slack. I know that the Department for Education and the Minister have acknowledged that. They understand the crisis in maintained nurseries and they provided the supplementary funding block to help these nursery stay afloat. I am adding my voice to those of the hon. Members who have spoken today. To refuse to give a funding commitment until the spending review later this year—until after the schools will need to set their budget for the coming years—is a disaster waiting to happen.

The Minister has said a number of times elsewhere and in this place that local authorities should not make premature decisions about the future of maintained nursery schools. That is welcome, but the sector is being asked to wait for the spending review, without a date or a commitment about whether it will be for one, three or five years. With Brexit looming, it is no surprise that the sector is deeply worried. How can he reasonably expect schools to commit to paying staff and to promising families that they will educate their children if they literally do not know whether they will be able to afford to meet that commitment, as funding could be cut mid-year? Should we not put this piecemeal approach to funding to one side? Should we not sit down with the maintained nursery schools and come up with a package that gives them financial confidence, not just for the next 12 months but for the next 12 years?

We are not talking about some sort of hypothetical financial calamity in the future. Maintained nursery schools are already struggling. In 2010, 3.3% of schools were in deficit to the total amount of just under £600,000. Since then, 34 schools have closed their doors and 20.3% of schools are now in deficit to the total amount of £4.8 million. More concerning still is the fact that 64% of them expect to be in deficit by 2020, even before the current funding settlement runs out. Sadly, the Government’s current report card says, “Plummeting numbers and soaring deficits.”

Be in no doubt that the threat to these schools is serious. The culture of disregard has been felt across the whole of the early years sector in recent years. Since the introduction of the 30 hours of so-called free childcare, all types of settings have been continually warning of
financial difficulties. The Government’s own figures show that 53% of private nurseries in England have put up their fees since the introduction of the policy. Early years settings are trying to make do with less, but costs are rising all the time. It feels like they are often left standing against an oncoming tide. We cannot forget, either, that the minimum wage is rising again this year. We all support that, but early years is a low-paid profession and this rise affects it disproportionately. So I encourage the Minister to review the funding settlement, please. We want quality early years staff, but to get quality we need to pay them properly. Something has to change.

This debate has been informative, enjoyable, passionate and moving in parts. I and many Members in the Chamber look forward to what the Minister has to say. In conclusion, let me be clear: what we need and expect today is a clear funding plan. There has been praise for these services and schools, the things they provide for our communities, and encouragement of local authorities not to make premature decisions. It is good but it is not good enough. We need a commitment. These families and children are relying on the Minister to do the right thing. We need to fund the schools properly and give them certainty.

4.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this important debate. We have had 13 excellent speeches from the Back Benches, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and the hon. Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Lincoln (Karen Lee), for Reading East (Matt Rodda), for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

The common thread among all of them is that MPs from all walks of life have real knowledge of their maintained nursery schools; I totted it up, and they must have spoken about at least 25 maintained nursery schools, in itself a pretty robust sample if anyone ever needed one. What today’s debate has highlighted is Parliament at its best, coming together on an important issue.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central and I have corresponded on these matters on several occasions. I have obviously visited a number of maintained nursery schools and have met the kind of headteachers that many colleagues have spoken about, and so have seen the leadership, passion and commitment that headteachers deliver in maintained nursery schools. She will know that I absolutely understand and support the role of maintained nursery schools in giving some of our most disadvantaged children the best possible start in life. It has been heartening to hear the overwhelming support today for these wonderful institutions, which in many cases have been working at the heart of their communities for decades—certainly well before this rookie MP and Minister got to this place. I also want to thank the hon. Lady for her work in leading the all-party group that has done so much to raise the profile of maintained nursery schools and the challenges they face. I am pleased that we are having this debate today.

This Government’s ambition is to provide equality of opportunity for every child, regardless of background or where they live. High-quality early education is the cornerstone of social mobility, and the evidence shows that it particularly benefits the most disadvantaged.

I am proud of what this Government are doing on early years. We have extended free childcare for three and four-year-olds in working families to 30 hours a week. We are providing 15 hours of free early education for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds; since its introduction in 2013 over 700,000 have benefited from that entitlement. We have also introduced tax-free childcare, and by 2020 will be spending around £6 billion a year on childcare support. We have also made good progress on the take-up of early years entitlements, with 71% of eligible two-year-olds, 93% of three-year-olds and 96% of four-year-olds benefiting from some funded early education.

Childcare providers have done a fantastic job in responding to our ambitions and helping us to deliver our reforms. Thanks to the dedication of early years practitioners up and down the country, 95% of early years providers are now rated by Ofsted as either good or outstanding, and the percentage of children achieving a “good level of development” has improved every year since 2013. Over that same period, the gap between children in receipt of free school meals and their peers in terms of outcomes aged five has narrowed by 1.7%. However, too many children still fall behind in early years, and it is hard to close the gaps that emerge in that period. Some 28% of children still finish their reception year without the early communication and reading skills they need to thrive. That is why we set a bold ambition to halve that number by 2028.

Maintained nursery schools have played an important role, and their part in this is not to be underestimated in helping to achieve this ambition, not only in giving direct support to children but in sharing their skills and expertise for the benefit of the wider early years system; we heard that from many colleagues who described how they operate in their local community. They are a small, but important, part of that system. They currently provide around 4% of the universal entitlement hours for three and four-year-olds, and the best of them punch way above their weight in other areas as well. We know, for example, that they take greater proportions of children with all levels of special educational needs than any other providers; that, again, was highlighted in today’s debate. I have seen for myself the great work they do, including at the Lanterns nursery in Hampshire and the Rothesay nursery school in Luton. The dedication and passion of their staff are truly inspiring.

I know that there is uncertainty over the future—we heard that loud and clear today. The current arrangements that protect maintained nursery school funding, which provide nearly £60 million of additional funding a year, are due to end in March 2020. This supplementary funding was a temporary arrangement to ensure that maintained nursery schools did not miss out when we introduced the early years national funding formula, and we need to decide what should happen once that supplementary funding ends. Our intention has been to look across the evidence and to resolve this question as
[Nadhim Zahawi]

part of the spending review negotiations. No maintained school yet knows its funding after March 2020—a fact that came across loud and clear from many colleagues today, including the right hon. Member for East Ham. That is a difficult place for the schools to be; I am aware that, on average, the supplementary funding for maintained nursery schools accounts for about a third of their budget. Their anxiety is understandable, and funding for the summer term of the 2019-20 academic year is clearly focusing minds.

In resolving questions of future policy, this Government are committed to making evidence-based decisions. This has always been a challenge in regard to maintained nursery schools because there are fewer than 400 of them and they have a wide range of delivery models, so it is difficult to include them in broader early years studies. There is research on quality in the early years, including stand-alone local studies of outcomes and national data about the children who use nursery schools, but together they do not definitively demonstrate the value that maintained nursery schools offer. The methods used in local studies vary, and many studies do not take account of other factors that have a crucial influence on a child’s outcomes, such as the home learning environment.

To fill some of these evidence gaps and improve our understanding of maintained nursery schools, we commissioned further research last year to explore their services, costs and quality, compared with other providers. That research will be published very soon, otherwise more of these schools are going to start closing down.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that intervention. That message has come across loud and clear today, and this is something that we are very cognisant of.

Theresa Villiers: I warmly welcome the research that the Minister is talking about, but I am afraid that the clock is ticking. We need to plug the funding gap soon, otherwise more of these schools are going to start closing down.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to them for their patience, and, as I have said elsewhere, I urge them to wait for the outcome of the research very soon. I know that this is later than we had originally hoped, and I apologise for that, but it is a complex piece of work and it is important that the researchers take the time to ensure that the findings are as robust as possible. If we are going to make those arguments, we are going to need that data. It will be a helpful contribution to the discussion, and I am prepared to look at any data points that colleagues can offer.

Stephen Timms: I think that that research will be useful, but can the Minister at least give an assurance today that maintained nursery schools will know by the end of the current financial year what their future funding is going to be?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am pushing as hard as I can to ensure that we are able to go back to the sector with a position as soon as possible. As I said earlier in relation to the urgency over admissions and the lack of clarity over the budget, I hope I can reassure colleagues that this is at the top of my to-do list in the Department.

We already know that there is significant variation both in the services that maintained nursery schools provide and the cohorts of children that they work for. Maintained nursery schools were originally set up over a century ago to serve the poorest communities. It is clear, as many colleagues said earlier, that the gentrification of certain areas means that some of them may be working with a different profile of community or that has added to the pressure, and I look forward to meeting colleagues who want to discuss that further. While many nurseries take higher proportions of children with special educational needs and disabilities, and children in receipt of the early years pupil premium, there are others that, on the surface, do not look all that different from other providers. We will need to think carefully about how we respond to any disparities as we consider long-term solutions.

That said, I am conscious of the position in which local authorities find themselves. Many colleagues have made clear the urgency of addressing the financial crunch. Local authorities are already planning for 2019-20 and want to know how to treat their maintained nursery schools. I want everyone in the Chamber to know that I absolutely understand that. However, local authorities will also understand that the next spending review, which will set funding after March 2020, has not yet been announced. Owing to uncertainty over the exact date of the spending review, we are considering how best to handle transitional arrangements for several areas, including maintained nursery schools.

Despite such uncertainties, I am luckily not aware of closure processes starting under the local authorities to which I have spoken. That is an important point, showing that they are taking a sensible wait-and-see approach. I am grateful to them for their patience, and, as I have said elsewhere, I urge them to wait for the outcome of the process we have embarked upon before making decisions.

I want to take the opportunity again to thank the hon. Member for Manchester Central for her unstinting work in this area. She mentioned the deficit, and concern is increasing that maintained nursery schools are struggling to keep the books balanced, as many colleagues from around the country have said. A recent survey by the all-party parliamentary group on nursery schools, nursery and reception classes made a valuable contribution to the discussion. I think around 20% of maintained nursery schools were in deficit in 2017-18, which is slightly lower than the figure in the APPG’s survey, but that does not mean that we should be complacent. It is possible that some of the difference reflects the anxiety within the maintained nursery school sector in the same way that another APPG survey from two years ago suggested that around 60 schools may be under threat.
of immediate closure, and I am pleased that that number of closures did not happen over the subsequent two years. I hope that we can find a long-term solution, and that is my message to the APPG before the number of schools in deficit rises.

The message that I give to the House and take from the House is that we want to find a long-term solution for maintained nursery schools. In doing so, we will need to ensure that the high-quality specialist services that many of them provide in some of our poorest communities continue is safeguarded for the benefit of the children in their care. We also need to ensure that how we spend money across the childcare sector as a whole is structured to give all children the best possible start, so that they can go on to fulfil their potential. That, ultimately, is our shared ambition.

4.39 pm

Lucy Powell: I thank the 13 Back Benchers who have contributed to this debate and the many more who have intervened, which sends a powerful cross-party message to all parts of the Government, not just the Minister present today, that we want to see this issue solved, and solved quickly, on behalf of the maintained nursery schools in our constituencies.

The debate reflects the fact that there is a lot of evidence that maintained nursery schools are more than just childcare. They are high-quality early education in our most deprived areas, they support a large number of children with extra needs and they do a great deal more, as the Minister outlined, than simply providing nursery provision. That needs to be acknowledged.

The Minister talks about deficits and closures, but 2018 had the highest number of maintained nursery school closures in 10 years. This is already happening, and it is the tip of the iceberg. I appreciate his personal commitment, but as others have said, the cliff edge is fast approaching. Decisions are being made now for the next academic year, when the supplementary funding runs out.

I did not mention the two nursery schools in my constituency, Collyhurst and Martenscroft. I recently took the Secretary of State for Education to Martenscroft, and he could not believe what he saw. He was deeply impressed, and towards the end of the visit he asked me, “Who pays for this?” I leave the Minister with that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes that state maintained nursery schools are at the forefront of tackling low social mobility with 63 per cent graded outstanding by Ofsted, and 35 per cent good; further notes that two thirds of maintained nursery schools are located in the 30 per cent most deprived areas in England; notes that maintained nursery schools are recognised as being centres of excellence for supporting children with SEND in the early years; notes that the whole early years sector benefits from the expertise of maintained nursery schools acting as catalysts to raise standards in their locality through supporting schools and early years settings to work together to improve their quality; notes that despite welcome transitional funding the future viability of maintained nursery schools is under threat with 12 closing since 2016; notes the loss of transitional funding is equivalent to a 31 per cent cut in funding; and calls on the Government to safeguard the future of these vital early years institutions by guaranteeing transitional funding after 2020 as soon as possible whilst a long term plan to ensure their future viability is found by the Comprehensive Spending Review.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered.

That at the sitting on Tuesday 5 February, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Procedures under an Act or on European Union documents), the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on—

(1) the Motion in the name of Secretary Sajid Javid relating to Police Grant Report not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion, and

(2) the Motions in the name of Secretary James Brokenshire relating to Local Government Finance not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion or six hours after the commencement of proceedings relating to Police Grant Report, whichever is the later; proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Amanda Milling.)
4.42 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity once again to raise the ongoing issue of state pension inequality for women born in the 1950s. I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate in the light of the current judicial review, which has put the brakes on complaints brought by these women and given the Government a “get out of jail free” card on taking any further action.

As with any judicial review, this one will take time, and if the Government appeal the decision, they will be kicking the can further down the road. This back and forth through the legal system will not allow us to hold the Government to account and get any solutions for these women.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am struck by my hon. Friend’s comment that the judicial case prevents the Government from taking any action. From my point of view, the Government have deliberately taken no action whatsoever ever since the 1950s women began complaining about state pension inequality.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. As parliamentarians, we are all extremely frustrated. I believe that these issues need to be clearly and comprehensively addressed by the Government, which was why I asked the Leader of the House a couple of weeks ago for clarification on the ambiguity. Given the legal challenge in the High Court, I asked how parliamentarians could continue to discuss and make representations in this House on behalf of their constituents and, more importantly, whether the Government would respond on this very important issue.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that our constituents look to us and to this place to get action, and that the Government’s leaving this situation to be dealt with in the courts shows a failure of the political process? The WASPI women—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—should not have to go to court to have their voices heard.

Tonia Antoniazzi: That is exactly the situation we are in, and it is really sad—it upsets me, and it is frustrating. My constituents ask me what is being done, where we are and what we are doing, and this debate is an opportunity for the Government to respond to those questions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing the issue to the House for consideration. She has been proficient and active on this case. With 5,800 women in my constituency being out of pocket, many of whom are in manual labour jobs, my concern is that we are seeing a generation of women discriminated against and we seem to be achieving nothing for them. These women were told to expect something and they prepared their future financing around that. I am left wondering just what they did to warrant this treatment. Does she agree that this is nothing short of a disgrace?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. Gower has approximately 5,600 women in this position, so we are talking about a similar number. Before I came into the House, I was always thinking that I had to plan for the future and that I knew what was coming. I was disappointed that I would have to be a classroom teacher until I was 67, because that is a very hard job. I understand the issues associated with pension inequality—we need to be equal—but the nub of this issue is that people did not have the time to prepare.

Tracey Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is being empathetic and humane in her statement. There are nearly 6,000 WASPI women in my constituency, one of whom—a nurse called Sue—has been told she has to work another six years. The situation would be manageable if the Government were not so entrenched in their position of not agreeing to transitional arrangements. Does my hon. Friend agree on that?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I do agree, as I have been knocking on doors and met people who are in nursing and teaching, as I was. These people in physical jobs had planned to take retirement at the age of 60, but now are in a position in which they have to continue, and doing so is no mean feat. I feel that the Government have robbed the 1950s women of their pensions and their futures, ripping families apart and forcing more people into poverty as a result.

Before I say any more, I must pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). As co-chair of the all-party group on state pension inequality for women, she has worked tirelessly across party, and behind the scenes, with other members of that group to put together a private Member’s Bill. I remind Members that although our proceedings seem very adversarial when we are in the Chamber, we do work together, because we want the best for our constituents. At the same time, however, we do want to hold the Government to account and to have our questions answered.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. If there were a free vote tomorrow, there would be an overwhelming majority in this House in favour of justice for the WASPI women. This is an opportunity for me to put on record the absolute support and solidarity of the Scottish National party for everything that she is saying. I know that many of us, including my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who is in the Chamber, will be marching with the WASPI women in Glasgow on 23 February precisely for that justice.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, as it reinforces my point that we are here to get the best for our constituents.

The private Member’s Bill would go some way to supporting the women who have been hit the hardest. It asks for a review to establish the costings for a compensation scheme. I know that that is not exactly what everybody wants, but my question to the Minister is this: what will happen when my hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill has its Second Reading, which is scheduled for 8 March? Will the Government commit to fully responding to the Bill, or will it also fall victim to their can-kicking?
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): First, let me congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. There are 30,000 WASPI women in Birmingham and they are Birmingham’s best. They helped Birmingham and Britain, and they deserve justice and not to have their plans for retirement completely jeopardised by the Government’s shameful behaviour thus far. Does she agree not only that they deserve justice in terms of transitional arrangements, but that everyone should do everything they can, and that if Andy Burnham can introduce free fares in Greater Manchester for WASPI women, Andy Street can do the same in the west midlands?

Tonia Antoniazzi: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. Loneliness and mobility are big issues for all people. I feel very strongly about loneliness in particular. Women need to be mobile, whether to continue work or to achieve further training. As my hon. Friend points out, if that is the case in Manchester, it should also be the case in the west midlands.

As I have said, the campaign is not about scrapping the equalisation of the state pension age, but about the way in which changes were implemented. It was unfair, and women are now suffering. Letters about pension age changes were only sent out 14 years after the Pensions Act 1995. Those 14 years would have allowed women to make alternative plans. Having a year’s notice or five years’ notice—

Liz McInnes: Or no notice at all.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Or even no notice at all—my hon. Friend took the works out of my mouth. That is just not acceptable and we have to keep fighting for change.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an impassioned, compelling and informed case. We have all had letters from people complaining not necessarily about what has been done, but about the way it has been done. I had a letter from Christina Fitzgerald, who has osteoarthritis, which makes it difficult enough to work as it is. One would think the Government would learn from their mistakes, but is my hon. Friend as scandalised as I am by the fact that only last week they snuck out another change for WASPI women? For people of mixed-age couples, from here on in, it will be only when the younger one reaches pensionable age that either of them will be allowed to claim their pension credit. Is not this yet another case of women experiencing such hardship? What explanation can the Government give for not restoring to these women what is rightfully theirs, having paid their stamp, and for creating a huge problem for many by forcing them into poverty? What could the Government do to fund or reimburse these women? The Government evidently have access to their money and could do something.

I remember listening to the Minister in a Westminster Hall debate proposing a way forward for women who found themselves in dire straits without a job. He suggested that women take up apprenticeship and retrain, find new skills and get a job. If only it was that easy! The challenges of finding employment are not made any easier by the fact that being an older person has its own challenges.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is worth putting on record that that suggestion was so offensive to many of the women who have worked their entire lives and have already trained and gained qualifications. To suggest that these women go back to being apprentices was such a slap in the face after the way they have been treated time and again by this Government.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. That is exactly where we are, and it is just wrong. The Women and Equalities Committee commissioned—

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tonia Antoniazzi: It would be a pleasure.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is most gracious and kind in giving way. This is a very important point. Many people in my constituency are employed in manual labour, which means that, as they get older, they have disabilities, arthritis and other such issues. Does she agree that it is not realistic to expect those people to retrain? What they really need is their pension—and probably in many cases some sort of disability living allowance or an attendance allowance because of their disabilities.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point. When the Women and Equalities Committee took evidence from people about the difficulties they face in finding work, we found that employers need to make sensible adjustments in order to keep older workers. Can the Government guarantee that that is being done? It is recognised that ageism remains—

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way because, otherwise, I might have been the only person not to interrupt her, and I do not want to feel like the odd one out. As the other co-chair of the all-party group and a signatory to the Bill, which shows that there is cross-party agreement on this, may I say that I

“it is the right thing to do”?—[Official Report, 20 March 2013; Vol. 500, c. 941.]

Is not that at least as true of the WASPI women?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, because that is exactly the point. This is so wrong and we have to make sure that we do something about it. It is just unexplainable that we have women experiencing such hardship. What explanation can the Government give for not restoring to these women what is rightfully theirs, having paid their stamp, and for creating a huge problem for many by forcing them into poverty? What could the Government do to fund or reimburse these women? The Government evidently have access to their money and could do something.
agree with much of what she says? Will she just emphasise that many of us, over many years, have been trying to get changes to the way in which these formulas have been calculated, but that there is real urgency now for women who are facing very serious hardship? Certain measures could be taken to alleviate that obvious hardship without having to change the whole formula of how we address the injustice that most of us agree has befallen a small group of 1950s women.

Tonya Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and for the massive amount of work that he has been doing on the APPG with my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East. It is imperative that the Government look after those women who are hardest hit, and do so as soon as possible.

Ageism remains a significant problem and is affecting people’s ability to continue working into later life, despite long-standing laws against age discrimination. Discrimination in recruitment is a significant problem and the public sector is not leading the way in the retention of its older workers when it really, really should be. With that in mind, what actions have the Government taken to minimise ageism in the recruitment process? Let us be honest: when I think of some of the women in Swansea who have to carry on working, they will, unless they are still in their job, be left having to claim universal credit although they have worked all their lives. That can be an overwhelming and humiliating experience for many. Does the Minister think that the fuller working lives strategy is working and what aspects of the Women and Equalities report have the Government implemented?

I also wish to know what the Government have done to measure the wellbeing of this particular group of women? I think I know what the answer will be. Will the Department undertake a study to analyse employment levels among women born in the 1950s, the type of work they undertake and the levels of poverty for this group of women?

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Surely there is also an historic injustice here. If the women who were born in the 1950s were growing up in the 1970s, they would have been unable to go into a shop to get credit, or to rent a television, because those shop owners would have insisted that the male partner, or the father of that person, sign something to make sure that they could get those things. There really is an historic injustice in the way in which 1950s women have been treated by society.

Tonya Antoniazzi: That highlights the tragic state of our nation and how we have been treating women over the years. We have made great advances but, again, it is this group of women that has been hit the hardest.

There are different issues facing the women who are hit by these changes, and there are a number of movements that represent them. WASPI is the most recognised campaign, but all of them are directing their complaints about maladministration to the parliamentary ombudsman, rather than following the route of a judicial review like the BackTo60 women.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I have a number of constituents who have tried to contact the Department, but have not successfully received a response. This just adds insult to injury. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to ensure that people get full responses to their inquiries?

Tonya Antoniazzi: When people write to complain, their correspondence has to be recognised, responded to and acted on. It is an absolute disgrace if that is not happening.

5 pm
Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It is all right; the hon. Lady has not done anything wrong at all, although some hon. Members look puzzled. We have reached the moment of interruption, so I must call the Whip to move the Adjournment again.

Before I do so, let me take the opportunity to make a not very exciting announcement regarding a correction to the results of yesterday’s deferred Divisions. In all cases, there was one more Aye vote than previously announced. In respect of the Question relating to consumer protection, the Ayes were 310 and the Noes were 268. In respect of the Question relating to financial services and markets, the Ayes were 310 and the Noes were 261. In respect of the Question relating to floods and water, the Ayes were 311 and the Noes were 267. In respect of the Question relating to radioactive substances, the Ayes were 310 and the Noes were 265. The results of the Divisions were obviously not affected. I am sorry that I had to interrupt the hon. Lady’s debate to make that announcement, although the real reason for the interruption was for the Whip to move the Adjournment again. The hon. Lady will not lose any time from her debate because of these procedural matters.

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

5.1 pm
Tonya Antoniazzi: We all know that not all aspects of state pension inequality are the same, which is why I was shocked by a letter from the Minister published yesterday by the Work and Pensions Committee. The letter states that the Department has concluded that the issue in the judicial review does have an impact on the ongoing complaints. But when so many of these complaints are different, will the Government tell us what aspect of the complaints make them incompatible with the judicial review? Do the Government intend to clarify what part of the grievances can be taken forward or is this just another classic exercise of kicking the issue into the long grass, hoping that the women will go away once they have their state pension, and vanish into thin air?

Chris Stephens: I am a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, and insisted that a letter went to the Minister to ask about the number of cases. Does it shock the hon. Lady that 2,505 cases were closed automatically as a result of the High Court decision? That is a real concern because a lot of people will not know the issues around the judicial review, and, as she says, this might very well be separate from the complaints about maladministration that were reported to the Independent Case Examiner.
Tonia Antoniazzi: This is a huge issue. Where do these people stand now? That is the problem. People are busy; they are working, looking after grandchildren and running around the place. We all know what I mean. My mum is currently rushing around after my 14-year-old. Life happens. When people get a response, how do they react to it? This is why the groups of women who support each other on social media are giving each other a shoulder to cry on and a listening ear. They are a force to be reckoned with and I thank them for their work.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; she is being very generous with her time. There are 8,500 WASPI women in Plymouth, but they are dying. Justice delayed is justice denied, and many WASPI women are dying in poverty before they get justice and the pension that they deserve. The fight must continue in order to give the people who are still alive justice, as well as all the women we have lost.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. I completely agree with him.

Can the Minister provide a rationale as to why the independent case examiner has closed these 2,505 cases, and say precisely why they were closed? Knowing this, the women would be able to work out which aspect of their case they could proceed with. Otherwise, how are they going to know what to do next? How many of these complaints could have been answered before 30 November, and why does it take so long to deal with them? Now they have just been filed somewhere, and that is simply not good enough.

I would like to raise my concerns about the recent written statement on the pension credit update of 14 January. Written statements are often seen in this House as a way to bury bad news, and these further changes to the pension credit rules appear to put strain on lower-paid women. Can the Minister confirm that the effect of this change will be to debar a pensioner of either gender from claiming pension credit until their partner also attains state pension age? This measure, if brought in on 15 May, will slash the income of couples affected who can claim pension credit in future by up to £7,000 a year, in the worst cases, compared with the current rules. It is also worth noting that many of those caught by this policy change are likely to be women born in the 1950s, who will have been hit by this double whammy and rightly feel especially aggrieved. I hope that the Minister can give further clarification on this point.

I want to give a personal angle. I am very proud of my constituents. A year ago, I held a meeting on this issue in Mumbles, with over 300 women attending. As I have mentioned, approximately 5,500 women in Gower have been impacted by the pension age changes. Since then, they have held a few meetings and set up the Pension Justice for Swansea Women group, which includes all the other local constituencies. I could talk all day about the cases of women across Swansea who have had their lives turned upside down. I know women whose projected state age pension had been part of their divorce settlement. Then, when the goalposts changed, they had to go and find work and be financially worse off. These are women who have had to find low-paid and unskilled work to make ends meet—and, as I have said, they were lucky to even find that job. I know many women who have caring responsibilities, including one who looks after her grandchildren so that they do not go into care and cannot find a job to fit in with school hours.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, I was a nurse, and I am of the WASPI age too. A lot of the people I worked with had worked long and hard all their lives, as care assistants and housekeepers as well as nurses. They did not earn enough money to save anything. Now the goalposts have moved and they cannot retire, but they are too old to do that really hard, physical work. It is terrible—shameful. Yet we hear a lot of warm words about looking after our NHS staff.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Let me give a little bit of advice to the hon. Lady. She turned her back on the Chair, and that means that she cannot be properly heard; and she cannot go on speaking when she has sat down again. It is not a silly, old-fashioned rule—it just works better if everybody looks in the right way and stands up to speak. It is simple.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, because it is true. When people are doing physical jobs that they have done all their lives but now have bad knees or a bad back and are suffering, it is impossible.

Women are busting a gut to keep their families together. These are women I know like Pauline and Gaynor in Swansea who consider themselves to be better off than others but who, when they tell me their own stories, bring me to tears. That is why I do not want to let the Government off the hook. As parliamentarians, we cannot allow this Government to hide behind a judicial review.

I am grateful to the Speaker for granting this Adjournment debate, because the frustration of the 1950s women is unabated. Today they are here, they are watching online, and they are listening to us intently. The strength of feeling is real. The clip of me on my Facebook page asking the Leader of the House a question two weeks ago had 1,300 shares and hundreds of comments and likes—from across the United Kingdom, not just Gower and Swansea. No amount of can-kicking and hiding behind sub judice will make these excellent and committed women go away. This is an opportunity for the Minister to give some clear answers, do the right thing and restore faith, which I hope he will do.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing the debate. It is an opportunity for me to address some of the points that she raised, as far as I can, given that a judicial review is ongoing. There are obviously a number of key drivers behind the decision to make these changes by successive Governments, dating back well over 25 years. It is important to briefly restate them before I turn to her points.

This change was part of a wider trend towards gender equality. The decision was taken partly as a result of European and equality legal cases in the early 1990s relating to occupational pension provision. Life expectancy
and state spending were also key factors in the changes to state pension age. Following the passing of the Pensions Act 1995, the actual and projected growth in the pensioner population continued faster than anticipated as a result of increasing longevity. As a result, it was clear that a state pension age fixed at 65 was no longer affordable, fair or sustainable.

The Labour Government between 1997 and 2010, and the hon. Lady’s predecessor who was the Member of Parliament at the time, took action in the form of the Pensions Act 2007, which introduced an increase in state pension age to 66, 67 and 68 for men and women. Further changes were brought in under 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 to complete by 2020.

The Pensions Act 2014 brought forward by eight years the increase in state pension age to 67 to complete by 2028, and introduced regular, independent reviews of the state pension age—the first of which was published by John Cridland in 2017—to ensure that the system remains fair, sustainable and affordable for taxpayers. It cannot be overstated how much life expectancy was one of the key drivers of the decisions of the Labour Government between 1997 and 2010, the coalition Government between 2010 and 2015, and the Conservative Government since then.

Chi Onwurah: Health inequalities and class.

Guy Opperman: I accept those points. That was specifically reviewed by John Cridland on an independent basis, as ordered by Parliament, in 2017. His report, a copy of which is in the Library, addresses those points.

I will make a couple of points on Cridland’s report—an independent report published in March 2017. I was going to come to the hon. Member for Gower. Life expectancy at birth in Swansea is 77 for men and 82 for women, but it has increased for both men and women in that area since 2001 and 2003 by two years. It has increased in every local area of the UK over the same period. In the hon. Lady’s region, life expectancy is 17 years for men at 65 and 20 years for women, and this has increased again since 2001 and 2003.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will move on to the particular point about healthy life expectancy.

I had prepared specifically for the south Wales example. I do not have the north-east examples, but they are broadly analogous. I may be able to provide the north-east examples before I sit down. The Office for National Statistics releases period life expectancy by local area of the United Kingdom, but not by parliamentary constituency, as I explained earlier to the hon. Member for Gower. Life expectancy at birth in Swansea is 77 for men and 82 for women, but it has increased for both men and women in that area since 2001 and 2003 by two years. It has increased in every local area of the UK over the same period. In the hon. Lady’s region, life expectancy is 17 years for men at 65 and 20 years for women, and this has increased again since 2001 and 2003.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the Minister for the personalised data for Swansea on life expectancy. While all of us will not disagree with the principle behind state pension equality, can we have an inquiry into the state of the nation—the state of the 1950s women currently in the United Kingdom, by area, including the north-east, so that we know what the impact has been on working women from mining families and similar backgrounds to mine in Swansea? For me, that would be a useful inquiry to have the results of.

Guy Opperman: With respect, the point about individual cohorts and the deprivation point are answered in the Cridland report—an independent report published in March 2017. I was going to come to the hon. Lady’s specific point about the assessment by the Women and Equalities Committee and address the point about difficulties faced by older workers and their ability to get employment.

The Government are committed to improving the outlook for older workers affected by the state pension age and removing the specific barriers. Some of this has involved taking practical action such as changing legislation. Other aspects involve a culture change. The latest figures show that employment rates for older workers have been increasing, with 10.3 million workers aged 50-plus in the UK. That is an increase of 1.3 million in the past five years, and 2.3 million in the past 10 years. The number of workers over 65 has now more than tripled, from 0.4 million 20 years ago to 1.3 million now.

The specific work changes have been removal of the default retirement age, and extension of the right to request flexible working to all, meaning that people can discuss flexible working requirement to suit their needs.

Tracy Brabin: Will the Minister give way?
Guy Opperman: Bear with me. I will try to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Gower and then I will let the hon. Lady question me.

In October 2018 the Department for Work and Pensions published the “Economic labour market status of individuals aged 50 and over, trends over time.”—a catchy title. Those official statistics provide analysis of the headline measures that the Government use to monitor progress on the fuller working lives programme. The hon. Lady specifically mentioned the programme, which was published a couple of years ago. As for data, the estimates of paid hours worked, the weekly, hourly and annual earnings of UK employees by gender, and full-time and part-time working by age group are already publicly available. They are published as part of the Office for National Statistics’ “Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings” statistical bulletin, which can be found online.

Tracy Brabin: Is there any impact assessment or data concerning young women who can no longer go back to work because their mum, auntie or grandma is having to find a job, so they cannot take up the job that they want because their mum, for example, can no longer provide free childcare?

Guy Opperman: I can only refer the hon. Lady to the specifics that I have given: the Department for Work and Pensions’ assessment, “Economic labour market status of individuals aged 50 and over”, which contains the official statistics that we use for the fuller working lives programme, and the survey by the Office for National Statistics. I do not have a specific answer to her specific question, but I expect a consideration of that point to be within the ambit of the work that those two organisations have done.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: May I finish this point? Then I will, perfectly properly, allow the hon. Gentleman, who is a member of the Select Committee, to intervene. I am keen to deal with the issue of the judicial review, which I have not yet addressed.

We have appointed Andy Briggs as the business champion for older workers. Along with the Business in the Community Age at Work leadership team, he spearheads the Government’s work in helping employers to retain, retrain and recruit older workers, actively promoting their benefits to employers throughout England, both strategically and by means of practical advice.

I will now give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens).

Chris Stephens: I am grateful to the Minister. I will be brief, because I want to hear what he has to say about the judicial review. Is he saying that it is Government policy, as well as his view, that there is a difference between an individual’s working life expectancy and an individual’s life expectancy?

Guy Opperman: I shall try to respond to the hon. Gentleman’s question in writing in order to be specific, but my understanding is as per the Cridland report, which was fundamentally adopted by the Government. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the reviewers assessed the position on an individual, independent basis, having heard copious evidence, travelling all over the country taking representations from trade unions and devolved Administrations and producing in the fullness of time, a very comprehensive report.

Let me now turn to the complex issue of the judicial review. Members will be aware that the High Court has ruled that a judicial review on these matters will go to a full hearing. The case is listed to be heard in the Divisional Court on 5 and 6 June. It would clearly be inappropriate for me, or any other Minister, to comment further on live litigation.

Members will also be aware that complaints of maladministration have been made about the Department’s handling of the communications relating to the state pension age changes. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has decided to suspend consideration of those cases until a final decision has been made in the judicial review. Separately, the Department for Work and Pensions has suspended work on the complaints until a final decision has been reached by the courts. We have sent—and are sending—letters explaining that to individuals who have sent complaints to the Department in order to ensure that they are properly informed of the suspensions, and information has been added to the gov.uk website.

We have also undertaken to follow up individuals who already had active complaints in the DWP system, and to give them further information on next steps following the reaching of a final decision in the courts. It is right of course that we communicate those next steps as and when they are clear.

Matters outside the scope of the judicial review will continue to follow the normal DWP complaints procedure. Separately, the independent case examiner closed all the live maladministration complaints when they became subject to legal proceedings, as is required under its governance contract. When the legal proceedings are concluded, the independent case examiner could consider reopening the cases at the request of the Department.

The actions taken by the Department in respect of the maladministration complaints is consistent with the approach of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman’s office. As I pointed out in my letter to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee on 15 January, this approach is fundamentally consistent with any situation where the Government are subject to a judicial review, as in this case, whether in relation to their actions or the actions of another Government—I stand here defending the actions not just of this Government but of the coalition Government, the Labour Government of 1997-2010 and the preceding Government, all of whose actions are effectively the subject matter of the judicial review.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I am trying to get my head around this. The subject matter of the judicial review is not an issue of maladministration, so does the Minister not accept that there is no reason for these complaints to be on pause, as he put it?

Guy Opperman: I am conscious that I have limited time, so I will write to the hon. Lady and the Chair of the Select Committee to expand upon my answers. As I am sure she understands, I am constrained in what I can say about a live judicial review case, but I think I have
Guy Opperman

set it out in quite a lot of detail. The DWP cases are currently paused, but we would aim to ensure that these complaints are completed without a complainant necessarily reapplying. That said, I will go into more detail in writing and seek to amplify my answer in respect of the independent case examiner and the ombudsman system.

I want to address briefly the point about the national insurance fund that the hon. Lady raised. It is simply not true that the national insurance fund is used purely to reduce national debt. It is financed on a pay-as-you-earn basis with receipts collected in one year used to pay for certain benefit payments, including the state pension paid out in the same year. It is important that the working balance of the national insurance fund remain positive, as this ensures there are always enough funds to pay for these benefits and allows the Government to deal with short-term fluctuations in spending or receipts.

If the balance of the fund is expected to fall below one sixth of the forecast annual benefit expenditure, the Government will transfer a Treasury grant paid for by general taxation into the national insurance fund. This ensures that benefits such as the state pension can always be paid as necessary. It is inaccurate to suggest there is a surplus in the fund that can simply be drawn upon. The balance of the fund is managed as part of the Government’s overall management of public finances and reduces the need for them to borrow from elsewhere, so any additional spending from the national insurance fund would represent an increase in overall Government spending and, without cuts in other areas of spend or additional taxes, an increase in Government borrowing. This is a policy that has been continued by successive Governments since the 1980s, and it simply is not correct to state that, had the supplement continued to be paid at the same level as previously, the fund would have the capacity to satisfy the claim of the ladies.

I will briefly touch on the issue of pensioner poverty to make the point that, since 2010, there are 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty, which is a record low. The hon. Lady will be aware that we spend £121 billion on benefits for pensioners, including £97 billion on the state pension this year—2018-19. The overall trend in the percentage of pensioners living in poverty shows a dramatic fall over several decades, from 40% in the 1970s to 16% in relative poverty now. Clearly, more needs to be done, but the direction of travel is quite clear. Between April 2010 and April 2018, the basic state pension has risen substantially, by £1,450 in cash terms. The fact remains that the key choice any Government face when life expectancy is increasing 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 share of their income to support pensioners. I believe that successive Governments have made the appropriate but difficult decisions to equalise and increase the state pension age.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I shall develop a very similar case in a moment, but I suspect that it goes wider than Government, because I suspect that the Minister and most others who speak today will agree that it is simply shameful that the divide has been allowed to grow. I suspect that the Minister will blame the Treasury, and I have some sympathy for that position, but I guess that others will say that the problem goes deeper. The near invisibility of further education and now, apparently, other colleges to people in this place is not a new phenomenon. Arguably, it is at the heart of our current political problem—a divided country, with too many people left behind and ignored. No wonder the education divide mirrors the EU divide almost exactly. That is why I argue that it is in everyone’s interest—everyone’s—that this huge injustice be tackled.

Let me go into some more detail regarding the petition and then move to discussing the national picture, alongside some examples local to me, and the impact of the current funding squeeze. As I said, the petition calls on the Government “to urgently increase college funding to sustainable levels” in order to “give all students a fair chance, give college staff fair pay and provide the high-quality skills the country needs.”

The petition notes: “Funding for colleges has been cut by almost 30%” over the past decade, stretching resources, support and the staff available.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): In Hartlepool, we have three excellent 16-plus providers: Hartlepool College of Further Education, Hartlepool Sixth Form College and the English Martyrs School and Sixth Form College. Some of their cuts since 2010 have gone up to 62%. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need urgently to address funding in order to avoid the irreparable damage that that might do to our colleges?

I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I suspect that we may be going on a regional tour of colleges over the next 25 minutes or so. The picture that my hon. Friend paints is familiar across the country; indeed, it is all too recognisable across the nation. I represent Cambridge, a place that is rightly associated with excellent education and where higher education often dominates the agenda and discourse. Somehow that makes the contrast all the more stark between the focus on higher education policy—and, frankly, the resources—and that which goes to further education. Many of us remember the huge national outrage when tuition fees for university students were introduced and later trebled, but when fees were introduced in further education, where was the outrage? Where were the marches? In my patch, it was just me and a handful of local trade unionists out there talking about it—thanks, Peter Monaghan and others from Cambridge. Some people noticed, but the vast majority did not. Was the matter considered newsworthy? Hardly at all.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I would like to add to the points that my hon. Friend is making. Where was the outrage when the education maintenance allowance was taken away? That seriously affected students
[Liz McInnes]
in further education, many of whom were unable to
afford the bus fare even to get to college and receive an
education.

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That
issue is almost worthy of a whole debate in itself, but
the problem is not just the removal of the education
maintenance allowance, of course. Where was the outrage
in the country about the near collapse in the number of
mature and part-time students? People can read about
that in the pages of the specialist press; I think that we
all know why it does not reach any further.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) rose—

Daniel Zeichner: I see my right hon. Friend ready to
make some strong points.

Mr Lammy: On that excellent point, does my hon.
Friend agree that we need to hear from the Government
not about bringing back grammar schools, but about
funding night schools? If, indeed, we exit from the
European Union, should we not be giving people in our
seaside towns, northern industrial areas and parts of
London the skills to compete in the economy that we
are going to have?

Daniel Zeichner: Characteristically, I completely agree
with my right hon. Friend. Of course, he has been
campaigning on these issues very powerfully; I just
hope that people are listening.

Let me give some of the numbers. According to the
House of Commons Library, in 2010 the average funding
allocation was £4,633 per student. The 16 and 17-year-old
funding rate has been frozen at £4,000 since 2013-14.
The rate for 18-year-olds was cut to £3,300 in 2014-15 and
has remained frozen since then. Funding per student
aged 16 to 18 has seen the biggest squeeze of all stages
of education for young people in recent years. By 2019-20,
funding per young person in further education will be
about the same as it was in 2006-07—only 10% higher
than it was 30 years earlier.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does
my hon. Friend agree that the £3.3 billion of cuts in
further education since 2010 is utterly devastating and,
given the higher proportion of working-class students
attending further education colleges—I was one of them—
does he agree that this Government are hell-bent on
making life a misery for working-class people in this
country?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend makes the point
very powerfully. As I said, I see the divide in my own
city. She is absolutely right.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op):
My hon. Friend rightly mentioned the £4,000 rate freeze.
He might like to know that, had the rate increased by
inflation since 2013, the figure would be almost £4,300 today;
that is just if it had kept pace with inflation. For cities
such as Stoke-on-Trent, there would have been about
£2.5 million more funding for further education. What
does my hon. Friend think that we could have done with
that money?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful
point. When many of us go into institutions and ask,
“What could you have done and what would the difference
have been, had you had these resources?” the response is
very telling. I am sure that we will hear similar accounts
from others. I will come on in a moment to some of the
implications of the numbers.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The hon.
Gentleman is making a powerful case. Just to put a
positive spin on it for this Government in the beginning,
my local college listened to me and it is very pleased
about the bus passes for 16 to 18-year-olds. That has
made a great deal of difference for its students.

On the point that the hon. Gentleman is making
about the finances, the two colleges in my area—the
excellent Richard Huish College, which is in the top
10 in the country, and Bridgwater and Taunton College,
which also does an excellent job—have both raised
concerns about finances. They find that the cuts mean
that they cannot offer staff as much as systems outside
FE can, and that it is difficult to recruit. Might the hon.
Gentleman comment on that? In the light of the fact
that schools outside that system got a 3.5% pay award,
which is hugely welcome—I know that those teachers
welcome it—does he agree that we should look at the
FE system and at least bring it into parity?

Daniel Zeichner: Strangely enough, I will come on to
staffing issues in a moment. I suggest that the hon.
Lady addresses those points to her colleagues on the
Government Benches, because they are in a position to
do something about it. Young people will be even more
enamoured with free bus passes for people up to the age
of 25.

Spending per student in school sixth forms will be
lower than at any point since 2002. Although there are
some minor scraps of comfort around funding for
meals and certain subjects, and extra hours for T-levels,
they do little to address the cuts that we have seen.

The issues are slightly different for sixth-form colleges
offering A-levels and further education colleges offering
a number of different qualifications, but the problem of
cuts is universal. Our friends at the Sixth Form Colleges
Association have tirelessly campaigned on that with their
“Raise the Rate” campaign, which has attracted the
support of many MPs. They are calling for the national
funding rate—the rate of funding per student—for
16 to 18-year-olds to be raised to at least £4,760 per
student, including 18-year-olds, and for it to be kept in
line with inflation year on year.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend as
puzzled as I am that, at £3,300 each, 18-year-olds are
the cheapest people in the world to educate, given that,
in my experience, people on an additional year are
actually the most demanding to teach?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend makes a very important
point. Those students suddenly and miraculously become
much more expensive when they turn up at university; it
is amazing.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I am sorry that I
cannot stay for the whole debate, but I am chairing a
Committee later. The hon. Gentleman may mention it
later in his speech, but I wanted to put on record the important matter of special needs funding. Oaklands College in my constituency has 200 pupils with special needs funding, and that puts huge pressure on the college. I am fully aware that there are cutbacks to be made, but sometimes services just have to be provided for people who have particular needs and need to get their life back on track.

Daniel Zeichner: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady, and I will come to that point in my speech. I want to turn to some of the effects of this underfunding, which is significant and has damaging consequences in sixth forms. In total, 50% of schools and colleges have dropped courses in modern foreign languages as a result of funding pressures, with A-levels in German, French and Spanish being the main casualties. That would seem to be the wrong way to go, especially when we are talking about global Britain.

Over one third of sixth forms have dropped science, technology, engineering and maths subjects, while two thirds have reduced student support services, such as mental health support, which we know is increasingly required. There are also, in many cases, limited careers advice services, and that also has a damaging effect. Two thirds of schools and colleges have moved from a four-subject offer to a three-subject offer, significantly reducing students’ choice and ultimately narrowing their options after study. For state schools with sixth forms offering post-16 study, the underfunding affects the education of all students, because, as we know, such schools frequently cross-subsidise post-16 education with funding that is meant for 11 to 16-year-olds.

Given that this country, quite rightly, requires its young people to participate in education or training until the age of 18, it seems quite incredible that across all 16 to 19 provision we reduce investment in education so sharply at the age of 16, from £5,341 for a 15-year-old to just £4,000 for a 16-year-old.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the level of cuts is so extreme that very dramatic steps are being taken? Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College is one of the biggest in the country, but it has cut its A-levels completely. It has also cut back on English for speakers of other languages, because funding has not been available. It is now redeveloping its sites to release land, just to keep itself going. How can we plan for the future of FE, when there is so much uncertainty and so little finance available?

Daniel Zeichner: As always, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is very difficult for people working in the sector to plan ahead. With years of area reviews, and all the rest of it, it has been a tough time. At the moment, the situation ahead does not look that good.

Further education colleges provide our communities with access to skills across the board. We see even more diverse challenges there. Although, in their response to the petition, the Government acclaimed their commitment to the adult education budget, in reality the initial teaching and learning funding allocations for adult further education and skills in England fell from a baseline of £3.18 billion in 2010 to £2.94 billion in 2015-16—a reduction of 14% in real terms—and more for the non-apprenticeship part of the adult skills budget. Since then, there has been an increase in funding for apprenticeships, but that really cannot make up for the thousands of people across the country who have suffered as a consequence of these cuts, and who want to upskill and reskill, as technology changes our jobs and our lives.

What about those who work in colleges? College staff were mentioned earlier. Staggeringly, college teachers are paid on average £7,000 a year less than those in schools, according to the University and College Union. In conjunction with busier jobs and fewer resources, this is stretching staff to breaking point, as any of us who go into colleges will hear.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): On that point, 57 members of staff were recently made redundant at Warrington and Vale Royal College in my constituency when the Northwich campus was closed. It is facing funding pressures of about £4 million as a direct result of this under-resourcing.

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is right and sadly there is a familiar story of not only redundancies, but insecure contracts. The level of morale is really challenging for so many staff. Unison’s head of education, Ruth Levin, pointed out that colleges have faced underfunding, leading to job cuts, course closures and larger class sizes “for many years”. She went on to say:

“Pay in further education has fallen by more than 21% in real terms over the past nine years”. It is clear that further education colleges have been hit the hardest in recent years, and it is simply not possible to continue down this road of less funding and more demand.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Further education colleges are being asked to implement T-levels, but the T-level system, even though it has not started yet, is already in crisis. The exam boards are taking the Government to court. The colleges are saying that they are unable to cope with the level of funding. Employers are unaware of them. Will that not add to colleges’ burden?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend raises some important points. I guess it will be for the Minister to respond. In a sector that has seen constant change and churn over many years, there is sometimes a yearning for stability.

On that note, the Prime Minister’s review into post-18 education and funding, chaired by Philip Augar, was announced last year and is eagerly awaited—although I guess the Prime Minister might have other things on her mind at the moment.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making the point about pay and the impact on recruitment and retention. Does he agree that it is especially acute for specialist areas? Sheffield College has seen significant growth in the delivery of higher apprentices in engineering and manufacturing, but it is really struggling to recruit in those specialisms. It has run four recruitment campaigns, but still finds it almost impossible to recruit. These are areas that are crucial for the future of our economy. We need to ensure that they have full parity of pay so that we can attract the best and the brightest into this sector.
Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that. I was not aware of that, but I must say that recruitment is a continual problem in high-cost areas such as mine. Given the levels of pay, that is hardly surprising.

Returning to the Augar review, I fear that we will probably have much the same story. I suspect that there will be warm words about further education. However, certainly in terms of the coverage, I expect, yet again, the world’s focus to be on higher education and universities. Important though those things are, I fear that there are unlikely to be real solutions for colleges, but we live in hope—we shall see.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The hon. Gentleman just made an interesting point, but in coastal communities such as the one that I represent, which includes Lowestoft Sixth Form College and East Coast College, colleges are vital for the link from education to the workplace and in improving social mobility. We probably need a change in mind-set in this country with regard to how we fund post-16 education.

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Only a few days ago we were discussing that in the east of England—all-party parliamentary group. Would it not be wonderful if we could have cross-party consensus on this kind of change?

Even the Further Education Commissioner told the Education Committee that further education funding is “unfair” and “sparse”. I have seen this at Cambridge Regional College, an FE college in my constituency, which I visit regularly. I see the excellent work that staff do with students and apprentices from right across the east of England, but the college remains under-resourced and overstretched.

The principal of Cambridge Regional College, Mark Robertson, told me that “colleges train 2.2 million people annually, and … further education students aged over 19 generate an additional £70 billion for the economy over their lifetime. However, colleges and schools are facing increased pension costs and colleges have not yet had assurance that this increased cost—of around 2% of all income—will be funded.”

That makes no economic sense to me. With colleges adding such huge value to the economy, why are we hitting them so hard?

A similar situation can be found at the fantastic sixth-form colleges in Cambridge, Hills Road Sixth Form College and Long Road Sixth Form College, and in the sixth-form provision at Parkside Community College and Netherhall School. All the teachers at those colleges and schools tell me the same thing; indeed, I see it for myself week after week when I visit them. There are brilliant, hard-working, energetic young people, but increasingly they feel that the system is stacked against them.

Hills Road Sixth Form College is often cited as one of the best state sixth-form colleges in the country, but staff there have told me about the impact of cuts on their provision. Today, the college has £100,000 less to spend on additional learning support for students who need it than it did in 2010. It has been forced to offer fewer subjects and many students take fewer subjects. The average class size has grown by two students, while per capita student funding has dropped by over £1,000.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Ipswich was very pleased to welcome opportunity area status, which we were granted by the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), to try to improve the not very good social mobility in our area. However, there is no way that we will improve social mobility if we do not have the necessary facilities in place, and in particular the skilled and competent staff to help provide the opportunity for additional social mobility.

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend and near neighbour is absolutely right, and that is a key issue for the east of England, which is often seen as a prosperous and successful region, but its skills shortages have been a problem for a long, long time and they need to be addressed.

I will also quote Yolanda Botham, the principal of Long Road Sixth Form College, another excellent college in Cambridge. She tells me:

“The current level of funding has meant for Long Road that we have had to reduce our curriculum offer. We no longer provide A-level German, for example. We have had to reduce the broader opportunities and enrichment opportunities that we can provide, limiting the number of trips and experiences we can offer, which really matter for social mobility. Visits and trips show what’s possible and enable students to see beyond their immediate horizons.”

She says that it is particularly galling to note that “our private school neighbours, charging £17,000 annually, do not have to pay VAT, yet we do.”

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it seems a bit perverse in the days of Brexit to be cutting back on foreign language provision?

Daniel Zeichner: Indeed it is, but this place is full of ironies on a daily basis, is it not?

Yolanda Botham said that for her college “that £200,000 extra a year could really make an important difference, such as supporting through subsidy more students to take advantage of university summer schools and other opportunities.”

That is exactly the kind of point about social mobility that colleagues have been making. She continued:

“An increase in funds would allow us to better cater for the mental health needs of our students and so, over time, maybe reduce the demands on the NHS. This is in increasing need amongst young people.”

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Recently, I met principals from the Lancashire Colleges network, including the principals of Blackpool and the Fylde College and of Lancaster and Morecambe College. The point they really emphasised to me is that this situation goes beyond subject provision. Further education colleges are absolutely on the frontline of supporting young people through what can often be very challenging mental health needs, at a time when the NHS cannot cope and cannot meet those needs fast enough. Does he agree that FE colleges provide far more than just basic qualifications in education and support young people through what can often be a very challenging time?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is a message we hear in both colleges and universities: the demands on them are rising. If, at the same time, they have to cut back to just their core provision, who
helps the students and what happens next when those problems arise? The cost of meeting them moves somewhere else.

That colleges have to pay VAT has been a long-running problem for sixth forms, and it really is a kick in the teeth for headteachers who are doing their best to balance their budgets, while competing with private schools that are exempt from VAT.

The problems go wider still. The chief executive of Cambridge Academic Partnership, the multi-academy trust that runs Parkside Sixth Form College in Cambridge, spoke to me about the impact of cuts on the international baccalaureate. He said:

“The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme is recognised across the world as a rigorous qualification, and it is well regarded precisely for the breadth of its curriculum. IB students distinguish themselves by undertaking study across the academic disciplines at a more advanced level. Therefore, they leave further education with an impressive knowledge base that spans their native tongue, a foreign language, the Humanities, the Sciences, Mathematics, and the Arts. Within each of those disciplines lies a plethora of subjects from which students can tailor their Diploma according to the nuances of their interests and future plans. State centres that offer the IB qualification do so due to their commitment to developing well-rounded students, equipped to contribute across all sectors of society.”

Of course, after all that there is a “but” coming.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Daniel Zeichner: Ah, my hon. Friend is going to interrupt at the “but”— very good. Yes, I am happy to give way.

Faisal Rashid: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Last Friday, I visited Barrow Hall College in my constituency of Warrington South. It was so refreshing to see so many young people engaged politically and exhibiting so much potential—I could see their potential. Sadly, however, I fear that all too often that potential is being squandered by a further education system that is drastically underfunded. Does he agree that we should all support the “Raise the Rate” campaign, to ensure that young people receive the investment they deserve?

Daniel Zeichner: I very much agree. I also applaud my hon. Friend’s enthusiasm, which is the enthusiasm that can be seen in colleges. However, there is also that slight sense of shame when one sees the problems that they are facing.

After the “but”, the chief executive of Cambridge Academic Partnership told me:

“When funding is limited, the skills set that we wish to provide to our students is impacted. Registered IB centres wish to offer students sufficient choice between subjects to give them a learning experience that complements their interests and strengths. A lack of funding reduces that choice because sustaining the breadth of teaching expertise required becomes impossible. It is crucial that school funding reflects the importance accorded to a broad curriculum. If centres are forced to eliminate subjects, it either deters students from undertaking the programme, or undermines the principles of the qualification itself: to be principled, broad-minded and internationally minded.”

Post-16 education is vital to the UK’s prosperity, and at a time when many fear that the Government’s stance on immigration is making access to skills more uncertain, it is foolish to under-invest in young people’s education and training. To be competitive in a global marketplace, the UK must adequately resource the education of future generations. If the Home Secretary acts on the policy proposals in his immigration White Paper, which already threaten the economy as they will restrict access to skills so dramatically, it is essential that we push education and skills right up the agenda, or we will face a crisis that could take many years to resolve. We should be preparing now for that, as providing people with the skills that the country needs takes time, resources and support.

I will conclude by offering an alternative. Labour’s 2017 manifesto made a real offer for education—a national education service. There would be free, lifelong education in further education colleges, enabling everyone to upskill or retrain at any point in life. The manifesto noted:

“Our skills and training sector has been held back by repeated reorganisation, which deprives providers, learners and employers of the consistency they need to assess quality. Labour would abandon Conservative plans to once again reinvent the wheel by building new technical colleges, redirecting the money to increase teacher numbers in the FE sector.”

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), who is on the shadow Front Bench, will have more to say, but our manifesto commitment is a real offer for the further education sector and for students. It has to be a strong offer; we cannot go on like this. We cannot go on without being able to say why we as a country so undervalue our 16 and 17-year-olds. I hope that the Minister will be able to provide an explanation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. A huge number of Members are seeking to catch my eye. If every speaker sticks to six minutes for their speech, they should all get in.

4.58 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I welcome the Minister, who is my successor in the role. I know that she has a passion for further education.

We know that FE is vital for our economy. Done well, it can tackle three huge deficits: our skills deficit, our social justice deficit and our social capital deficit. Our colleges are vital assets. They are institutes that should be at the heart of every community. Although we are talking about funding today, I will take this chance to praise my local college, Harlow College, which is one of the finest colleges in the country. It has had a significant amount of funds to develop an advanced manufacturing centre, a new maths school and an aircraft college at Stansted airport, one of the first of its kind in the United Kingdom. I know that some funds are coming to our colleges, and that is one reason why I have visited Harlow College more than 65 times since I became a Member of Parliament. Nevertheless, the chasm in funding for education either side of a student’s 16th birthday has now widened to 24%.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has given FE the dubious accolade of “biggest loser” in education, noting that it is the only area to fall in real terms, year on year,
for more than 10 years. By 2020, we will be spending the same amount in real terms on educating and training 16 to 18-year-olds as we were in 1990. People might be forgiven for thinking that that is an accidental failure of policy making; the truth is that it is much worse. On 31 January 2017, the Minister for Schools told the Education Committee that in 2010 the Government decided to prioritise spending on five to 16-year-olds—on the grounds that it had a more demonstrable impact on life chances—than on post-16 education, when presumably it would be “too late”. But people develop at different points on the education ladder of opportunity and, for some, FE can be the chrysalis stage between the caterpillar and the butterfly.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): A recent report by the Centre for Social Justice showed that only 15% of people in the UK who start work at entry level will ever rise above that level, and that is one of the lowest percentages in the developed world. Does my right hon. Friend agree that colleges such the excellent Waltham Forest College are key if we are to upskill and change skills, and that we need to consider whether existing providers could deliver such the excellent Waltham Forest College are key if we are to upskill and change skills, and that we need to consider whether existing providers could deliver such training?

Robert Halfon: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Colleges are very important for social justice because they help to give people from disadvantaged backgrounds the chance to climb the education ladder of opportunity, even though we know that life chances are largely influenced during the time before a child starts school. The Education Committee, which I chair, will soon be producing a report on that subject.

FE colleges are the economic trampoline that our country badly needs. With one in 10 degrees now achieved in colleges, there is huge potential for FE to drive the revolution in degree apprenticeships that the Education Committee called for in our recent report on value for money in higher education. The introduction of T-levels is a good sign that the Government are getting behind FE rather than perpetuating its status as a poor relation of secondary and higher education, but the excellent investment in T-levels is not the same as core investment in FE. The £500 million provided for T-levels is additional funding for a new initiative. T-levels are of a scale and seriousness far beyond those of the relatively small-scale targeted funds, which are eye-catching in a Budget but will not lead to lasting long-term change.

Before embarking on costly new projects, such as national colleges and institutes of technology, the Government need to consider whether existing providers could deliver their policy objectives. We often announce new initiatives when we should really bring together and strengthen what we already have. On 10 October last year, as part of the “Love Our Colleges” campaign, we held a special session with the Association of Colleges, the National Union of Students and the Sixth Form Colleges Association. James Kewin from the SFCA told us:

“Too much of what we see in 16 to 19 now starts with the press release and works back…policy by press release is quite damaging and the much more mundane reality is we just need a higher rate of funding.”

That is exactly what the Education Committee wants to see, and it is why last April we launched our inquiry into school and college funding to examine where the truth lay in the polarised debate between those who say that education funding has been subject to swingeing cuts and those who claim it has gone up in recent years. Yes, our colleges need more money—starting with the core funding rate of £4,000 per student—but it is even more important that the Department for Education comes up with a long-term strategy for schools and colleges. If the NHS can have a 10-year plan and £20 billion extra, why can education and our colleges not have a 10-year plan and the money they need?

In the written evidence to our inquiry, the real-terms reduction in post-16 funding was deemed to be inexplicable after the raising of the participation age to 18, especially when one accounted for the fact that, as has been highlighted, the cost of providing education—particularly technical education—between the ages of 16 and 18 is higher. That is evidenced by the fact that charges for post-16 education in the independent sector have gone up rather than down.

In truth, changing all that will involve self-restraint on the part of policy makers and Ministers. We will need to resist the temptation to tweak and fiddle. We will need to focus on the outcomes that we want in 10 to 20 years’ time, not on what might be attractive over a shorter timetable. Yes, the Committee is hearing evidence that is critical of the Government’s approach, but we are trying to help the Minister and to be as supportive as we can of the Department as it enters into negotiations with the Treasury for the next spending review period. A Select Committee trying to help the Department it oversees is certainly swimming against the tide, but I hope that our report will lead to much more investment in FE colleges and a new, long-term approach. For too long, FE has been called the Cinderella of education, but we should remember that Cinderella became a member of the royal family, and she did not crash the carriage. We need to banish the ugly sisters of snobbery and underfunding.

5.5 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, and to take part in this incredibly important debate on further education funding. It is obvious that the matter is of great importance to my constituency, as we were one of the top 10 constituencies in terms of responses to the petition.

In my constituency we are lucky to have two sixth-form colleges in Nantwich—Brine Leas and Malbank—and we are extremely lucky to have the college I attended in Crewe. The college has changed dramatically since I was there. Not only has it changed its name to Cheshire College South and West, but the building underwent an incredible transformation during the last Labour Government and we are now proud to have a modern facility with fantastic resources, unlike the creaky 1960s tower block I enrolled at.

Cheshire College South and West provides a variety of courses, boasts its very own award-winning student-run restaurant called “Academy”, and has a hair salon, a theatre and an incredible fitness centre. The college sits in a residential area of Crewe, which is a post-industrial town that suffers from high levels of poverty, with
people trapped in work that simply does not pay. The college provides opportunities to many local schoolchildren and to the community in general, offering space for community groups, meeting rooms for businesses and experiences that people otherwise simply would not have.

It sounds too good to be true. There always is a “but” with these things, and the big “but” is exactly the reason we are here today: Cheshire College South and West faces huge funding challenges. I am here to highlight that and to make the Minister aware of how devastating it would be to my community to lose that excellent education provision. Sadly, we are already seeing the university I attended, Manchester Metropolitan, withdraw its university campus from Crewe; that is a huge blow. We cannot allow FE opportunities to shrink for my constituents as well.

A key point that really illustrates the funding pressures in FE is that in real terms, funding for 16 to 18-year-olds is back to its 1990 level. To put that into context, I was five years old in that year, Margaret Thatcher resigned and Nelson Mandela was released from prison. How can it be that 29 years later funding has gone so far backwards? I have been informed that while costs continue to increase, our college will face considerable funding pressures next year, causing a potential negative impact of more than £1 million. The college will undoubtedly make cuts, and we all know that cuts come in the form of jobs. That will be devastating not only for those who are dedicated to teaching, but for the opportunities available to our future generations, not to mention the impact on our local economy.

It is important also to make it clear that pay is a major issue both for staff and for the colleges for which they work. Two thirds of college leaders cite an inability to match pay expectations as a major barrier to recruiting skilled staff.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her powerful argument. The picture she has painted is very similar to the situation faced by Barnsley College. I recently met with staff there, who highlighted that the college is really struggling to recruit in core subjects. To make matters worse, students often come to the college below the standard that they should be at when they leave school.

Laura Smith: The situation that my hon. Friend and I are talking about is reflected in all constituencies, and that is why we are here today. The University and College Union has made it clear that funding reductions have meant that many colleges have had to make difficult decisions about what to fund. For students, those restrictions have meant fewer hours for teaching and support and a more limited range of study choices. For staff, pay has fallen in value by 25% in real terms since 2009. In cash terms, that means a £2,484 pay cut for those at the bottom end of the scale, rising to more than £9,000 for experienced lecturers and even more for those higher up the scale. For colleges that have failed to implement the recommended pay rises, the fall has been even greater. Since 2010, some 24,000 teachers have left the further education sector. That is around a third of the total teaching workforce.

Why is this happening? The Conservatives have ruthlessly cut funding for FE colleges and reduced entitlements for adult learners. That has led to diminishing numbers of courses and students, and has plunged the FE sector into crisis. The Labour party recognises that FE is an essential part of our education system that plays an important role in young adult education and lifelong learning. I firmly believe that after nearly 10 years of neglect, only the Labour party will correct the historic neglect of the FE sector by supplying the investment that teachers deserve. After all, it was the Tories who scrapped education maintenance allowance, which supported disadvantaged young people to stay in college—something that was so important to students in constituencies such as mine.

However, while this Conservative Government remain in charge of policy, I appeal to the Minister once again. I have already written and asked questions on this matter. First, what recent assessment has she made of the adequacy of Government funding for further education colleges in England? Secondly, what assessment has her Department made of the level of pay inequality between schools, universities and colleges in the education sector? Thirdly, what assessment has she made of the recent letter from Her Majesty’s chief inspector to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), which raised concerns about significant under-investment in the further education sector? I sincerely hope that the Minister can provide answers to those questions at the end of the debate.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you, colleagues, for your immaculate timekeeping.

5.12 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. For most of my lifetime—perhaps all of it—a misapprehension has pervaded and affected the application of Government policy. That misapprehension has been that people can only gain esteem and fulfilment through academic accomplishment. As a result, practical learning has been perpetually neglected by Governments of both parties.

It was in that spirit and against that backdrop that, as a shadow Minister in the mid-2000s, I began debating these issues and considering them carefully. Indeed, I worked with the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), who chaired the all-party skills group at the time and is the shadow Education Minister today, to look at how we could elevate practical learning. To do so, it was necessary to challenge many of the assumptions that had permeated previously—assumptions that were given life by the previous Government’s much-vaunted ambition to send 50% of people to university. I always thought the problem with that ambition was what it said about the other 50%, who did not go to university but went into practical subjects, further education and all kinds of other learning. We had some success. We grew apprenticeship numbers to their largest level in modern times—perhaps all of them. We protected the budget for adult learning, working with the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), who was Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills when I was the Minister for further education, skills and lifelong learning.

However, that success is now in jeopardy. I have to challenge the Minister about the decline in apprenticeship numbers that has resulted, in part, from a misunderstanding...
of the new levy—I am not against the levy as a matter of principle, but its implementation has been problematic—and the decline in adult learning in particular. I say that for the following reasons: first, there is a strong utilitarian case for further education and training, which is about feeding the economy with the skills it needs for us to prosper. That is a given, and I think all Members in this Chamber would agree with it. Secondly, there is a case for communal health being part of the value of practical learning. When people learn and gain new competencies, they grow and become better citizens, seeing themselves as more useful to those around them.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that one of the most valuable things that further education does is to allow people—whether they be native to this country or a migrant—to improve their language skills, including by learning a foreign language? That was always one of the ways in which FE colleges reached out and gave people opportunities.

Sir John Hayes: As the hon. Gentleman knows, FE colleges train 2.2 million young people and adults. The courses they run range from fundamental issues such as the acquisition of good English, as he suggests, to the most advanced skills. They also provide an opportunity for people to learn throughout their lives. FE is the principal vehicle by which people upskill and reskill in the way my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) described, and that is essential if we are to fuel the economy with what it requires. It is simply not enough to train people who are entering the workforce: we have to look at how people who are in the workforce already can adapt what they can do to suit changing economic circumstances.

Rebecca Pow: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will give way very briefly, as I am conscious of time.

Rebecca Pow: Does my right hon. Friend agree that FE colleges, particularly Bridgwater and Taunton College in my constituency, are really important in delivering the apprenticeship programme? That college has just won a Lion award, as it is doing such a good job. Although the Government’s apprenticeship programme must be commended, especially the Minister’s work, does my right hon. Friend agree that for the programme to really be successful, we must address the issue of funding for our FE colleges, because they are so valuable to its delivery?

Sir John Hayes: Yes, I agree. When I was the Minister responsible for apprenticeships, we not only boosted their number, but increased their quality. For the first time, we put in place statutory definitions of what an apprenticeship constituted. We moved away from the programme-led apprenticeships that had been a feature of the previous regime. We said that apprenticeships had to last a set amount of time, had to be linked to real employment, and had to confer real skills needed by the economy. My hon. Friend is right that apprenticeships matter, as long as they are of the right quality and are substantial, and that is what we built. However, I have to say that the levy has not been successful in maintaining that number. There are all kinds of questions about the apprenticeship levy, and I am sure that the Minister will want to answer those questions when she sums up.

As I have listed the virtues of further education and practical learning, I will finally say that it leads to personal fulfilment. The case for education can be made in terms of utility, or in terms of communal health and wellbeing, but ultimately it should be made for its own sake. People are more joyful, more contented and better for the learning they gain in FE colleges across this country, and we should be proud of that.

I will end here, Mr Walker, because you have sanctioned me not to speak for too long, which will come as a disappointment to my many admirers in the Chamber—mainly on the Opposition Benches, actually. I will finish by saying this: we plant trees for those born later, and we fund, fuel and furnish skills for them too, for in building those skills we build all of our futures.

5.19 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I have considerably fewer admirers than the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

This is a pertinent debate, and I thank everybody who made it possible: the college sector, sixth forms, the University and College Union, and members of the public. It is a topic that is close to my heart and that of the community I represent, as we in North West Durham have recently witnessed the direct impact of funding cuts for 16 to 18-year-olds. Last year, Wolsingham School was forced to close the doors of its sixth-form college to local pupils; we hope that closure is temporary, but it is a very serious situation. Many factors were cited, but essentially it boils down to the fact that rural schools, which are well loved by the community, were starved of funding for many years, particularly at the top age range.

In another part of my constituency, management and staff at Derwentside College are working incredibly hard to maintain standards in the midst of relentless real-terms cuts to their budgets and decreasing per pupil funding. In addition, because of the college’s large number of apprentices, it has been disproportionately hit by the effects of the apprenticeship levy. While the levy was supported across the board, it has been bureaucratic in its implementation and has hit numbers in key areas. All that uncertainty has taken place in the context of real-terms pay cuts for the incredibly dedicated staff. I have no doubt that that picture is being replicated across the country. Derwentside College is a wonderful college. It is so warm and welcoming. It is extremely important for my community that the resource is kept, because it is a place of safety and refuge from the harshness of everyday life, where people can study and learn for their future.

I agree with what was said in an earlier intervention: I genuinely think that the Government do not really care about further education. It was pointed out that working-class students disproportionately engage in further education, and perhaps that is why there is little care for the sector.

The crisis has been coming for many years, and the Government have been warned over and over again. Sixth-form funding for 16-year-olds has been frozen since
That cannot come too soon for the sector. The college sector, we will need a change of Government, or survive. I suspect that for a more expansive view is the bare minimum just to allow colleges to stand still. To increase national funding for 16 to 18-year-olds by extracurricular activities—the Government would have services to the required level, to protect minority subjects. The Association claims that to increase student support is important as any other sector. The Sixth Form Colleges further education colleges has to end. They are as and I agree with the point—that the snobbery around Government to love colleges; if only they would listen. value the work that colleges do. Never mind asking the communities they come from and their future employers which is around a third of the total workforce. 24,000 further education teachers have left the sector, the result? It is no shock that since 2010, approximately the sector. Teachers in further education colleges earn shocking and disastrous way to treat professionals in £2,484 pay cut at the bottom point of the scale. That is a and not had any additional funding for that. funding to deal with mental health problems—it is still not enough—but colleges have been left out in the cold. cuts elsewhere, such as in public health services, colleges are seeing increasing numbers of students with mental health and wellbeing difficulties. That is no wonder when poverty is entrenched.

I know that some people go into Derwentside College with no food in their bellies and no money to buy food. Lecturers—those dedicated staff—make sure that those young people have a meal in their bellies so that they can study. That is not accounted for in any spreadsheet or funding formula. Some schools have been allocated money to deal with mental health problems—it is still not enough—but colleges have been left out in the cold and not had any additional funding for that.

Thinking about the staff, college pay has fallen in value by a quarter since 2009 according to the University and College Union. In cash terms, that translates to a £2,484 pay cut at the bottom point of the scale. That is a shocking and disastrous way to treat professionals in the sector. Teachers in further education colleges earn on average £7,000 less than teachers in schools. What is the result? It is no shock that since 2010, approximately 24,000 further education teachers have left the sector, which is around a third of the total workforce.

Across the country, students and their families, the communities they come from and their future employers value the work that colleges do. Never mind asking the Government to love colleges; if only they would listen. The crux of the matter is—this was mentioned before, and I agree with the point—that the snobbery around further education colleges has to end. They are as important as any other sector. The Sixth Form Colleges Association claims that to increase student support services to the required level, to protect minority subjects and to increase non-qualification time—for example, extracurricular activities—the Government would have to increase national funding for 16 to 18-year-olds by £760 a student a year in the 2019 spending review. That is the bare minimum just to allow colleges to stand still or survive. I suspect that for a more expansive view of the college sector, we will need a change of Government. That cannot come too soon for the sector.

5.25 pm

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the many members of the public who have signed the petition on this extremely important matter. I want to set the scene by talking about what happens in Yeovil. We have an incredibly successful college. It does a fantastic job for its students and it very much wishes to be at the heart of skills development in the south-west, to work with other colleges and the local enterprise partnership, and to make a contribution, which it is well set to do.

The Minister will be aware that some of her officials have been working with the college to help develop various elements of the apprenticeship scheme, which has been a great success, and to think about what happens with T-levels. One feature of my part of the south-west is that it is a hub for defence industrial manufacturing and for the STEM skills that go with that. The college does incredibly well and is an exemplar of how to involve businesses—they often need skills that do not come out of universities in the same way as colleges—in developing programmes for apprenticeships and T-levels, and thinking about how they might look in the future.

On Thursday, I was at Leonardo, our helicopter manufacturer—the only end-to-end aircraft manufacturer that the UK still has—and I met the team that has been working with Yeovil College to help develop the apprenticeship scheme. They were incredibly enthusiastic about the college and what it can do not only for the company, but for the wider community.

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I asked him to do so only because he has spoken so eloquently about Yeovil College, and I should say a word about Boston College in my constituency. I met the students, governors and principal of it last week, but I neglected to mention them in my earlier contribution. They do a superb job.

Mr Fysh: I thank my right hon. Friend for, as always, making an eloquent contribution to the debate.

In my visits to Yeovil College over the years, it has become apparent that despite having a great amount to contribute and doing an incredible job, it suffers from having to do so on a shoestring. It has found budgeting difficult. For historic reasons, the fabric of the college could certainly do with improvement, and I have seen evidence of that.

As I am sure Members are well aware, the college system does not have the ability to avail itself of capital grants in the same way that schools and other parts of the education system can. That means that colleges have to make everything out of their basic income, which is a real disadvantage. When we add in the fact, which we heard from other Members, that revenue funding for further education students is a lot less than for university students or secondary school students, colleges are put at a disadvantage in trying to deliver programmes.

Part of the problem with the proposed T-levels system is that there is a lot of extra teaching, but for no more money. Perhaps we can have another look and work together as a group to approach the Treasury and make the case that if we are to get behind T-levels, as I am sure we should for all the other reasons we have heard, there must be adequate funding so that our colleges can do a proper job of delivering for the people who, as we have heard, really depend on them.
I thoroughly approve of thinking about colleges as places where adults’ skills can be developed. We heard about that earlier. As we talk about trade deals around the world, and given the speed at which industry is changing in the current technological age, there will be a great demand—probably an increasing demand—for retraining during people’s working lives. It is essential that our colleges play a central role in that. Maths already gets extra funding. Perhaps T-levels should be treated in the same way, because we could really get behind that. Underfunding our colleges degrades individuals’ choices. In Yeovil, for example, there is a great demand for secondary school-type places in the further education college. It does a great job in its sixth form with A-levels, and that is the only provision in Yeovil. There are no choices, so it is really important to the town that we get this right.

It is great that the petition has raised the issue. It is very important to everybody in my constituency to have a well-functioning Yeovil College that can deliver for the industry of our area and take our local economy from A to B.

5.32 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. The number of people here today shows how much value we put on the FE sector across the parties. I certainly feel that very strongly. The right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) reminded us that funding has been going down in real terms for the past 10 years. That is one of the reasons why today’s debate is so well attended and it reminds us that, frankly, all of us have our hands dirty on this front.

Further education in my constituency and across the piece is something I was involved in when I was first elected as a Member of Parliament in 2010 to 2015. I chaired the all-party group on FE and lifelong learning. I was also the first MP to launch the 100 apprentices in 100 days challenge, which was very successful and was copied by 200 other MPs over the ensuing years. I got to know the FE sector far better than I knew it before, not just locally but, more importantly, nationally. I became an absolute convert. Ever since that time, I have been committed to the belief that the FE sector, for academic A-levels and BTECs on the vocational side, provides a really important function in giving millions of our fellow citizens from 16 upwards an opportunity that they would not have had before.

Funding has been frozen for various historical reasons. I remember having long conversations with the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable). Believe it or not, he fought like hell to get the then Chancellor to try to get as much cash as possible. That was one of the areas where the Liberals and the Tories sometimes had a slight distinction, although I appreciate the words of the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who was a Minister at the time. We believed profoundly and passionately in the strength of FE and we had a battle. We won some and we lost some, as we all know, which is the nature of politics.

Where are we at today? We are reaching crisis level. The hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) mentioned how someone teaching A-levels at an FE college, such as the Eastbourne campus of East Sussex College in my constituency, will on average be earning £7,000 less per annum than someone teaching GCSEs at one of the excellent local secondary schools down the road. I beg the Government to understand and appreciate that that is not sustainable. I go as far as to say, as I mentioned earlier, that it is not just the Government’s fault. We have all dropped the ball to one degree or another over the past 10 or 15 years.

There is an opportunity now for the Government to demonstrate to the House, the FE sector and the millions of people of all ages who attend FE colleges around the country that they can change tack. In my own constituency, they could demonstrate that to the tremendous teachers at East Sussex College’s Eastbourne campus, who have been teaching A-levels to a high standard, despite the shocking real-term cuts to their salaries over the past few years.

I look forward to the Government acknowledging that there is a real problem. I look forward to their making a commitment today in this Westminster Hall debate to come up with additional funds, perhaps in the March Budget. I look forward to the Government not simply saying empty words, but demonstrating that they understand the strength of feeling within this Chamber that FE is not sustainable in its current form. I also look forward to the Government not seeing the half a billion for T-levels as solving the problem, because, as the right hon. Member for Harlow reiterated, T-levels are a different set of qualifications. I support T-levels. The concept is excellent, but that issue is not the same as the issue of the many thousands of teachers around the country, including in my own constituency, teaching A-levels on salaries that are so much worse than in the local schools.

It is no wonder that almost 25,000 people have left the profession over the past couple of years. I look forward to hearing real beef and vegetables from the Government: real details about what the extra funding will be.

5.38 pm

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker.

Every young person should have access to an excellent education, and further education colleges play a vital role in achieving that. In my constituency of Morley and Outwood, 111 people, including myself, signed the petition. I made the decision to sign it because I recognise that more needs to be done to address and highlight this important issue. As co-chair of the all-party group on education and vice-chair of the social mobility all-party group, I understand the importance that education has as the best way to improve one’s lot in life. That is why the issue is so important and why I felt compelled to sign the petition.

The Government will have raised funding for school pupils aged five to 16 by more than 50% in real terms by 2020, compared with 2000. That is to be praised and is a record we should be proud of. However, from looking at the House of Commons Library figures, it is clear that funding for the 16 to 19 age group has fallen. The Institute for Fiscal Studies’ annual report on education spending in England stated that the equivalent of 16 to 19 student spending has fallen from £6,208 in 2010-11 to £5,698 in 2017-18. The average funding per student for the 16 to 19 age group is now less than that for secondary school-aged students and for higher education students. The IFS estimates that it is about 8% lower.
than spending per pupil in secondary schools. I hope that parity is something the Government will consider in their response to the debate.

The fact that local authority maintained schools, academies and sixth-form colleges have to pay VAT was mentioned. Schools and academies are subsequently reimbursed for those costs through VAT refunds; however, no such scheme exists for sixth-form colleges. That is another area that I hope the Government are looking at, because it has been argued that that anomaly places sixth-form colleges at a disadvantage.

The Sixth Form Colleges Association claims that the average sixth-form college lost about £385,000 in 2015-16 because of that anomaly, and in November 2018 the Association of Colleges argued that the Treasury should use the opportunity afforded by Brexit to extend the VAT refund scheme to all publicly funded sixth-form level education. Again, I hope that the Government are looking closely at Brexit and any dividends that it could offer.

It is not all bad news, and the Government deserve praise where it is due. Investment has been announced to strengthen education for 16 to 19-year-olds in certain academic areas. As we have heard, a further £600 for additional students participating in level 3 mathematics will be available, and two payments of £600 may be made if, for instance, a pupil is taking two years of maths study. Moreover, it was announced in the 2017 autumn Budget that £40 million of funding has been allocated to establish centres for excellence in mathematics. Ministers have also made £300 million of restructuring funding available to colleges, and half of that has already been spent.

However, I feel that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), in his role as Chair of the Education Committee, was accurate in saying:

“Successive governments have failed to give further education the recognition it deserves for the role it plays in our national productivity puzzle.”

The Prime Minister has said that austerity is coming to an end. I hope that the Government are looking closely at this area, because it certainly needs to be addressed. We need to invest in our young people if we are to achieve our ambitions for our economy. I agree with the "Raise the Rate" campaign when its advocates say that if we are to meet our "objectives for a strong post-Brexit economy and a socially mobile, highly educated workforce”, we need to increase funding in this area. This is not the time to point fingers and play party politics—not with our young people's future. Let us now increase college funding to sustainable levels and see greater parity with secondary schools.

I thank the education leaders in my constituency, including the fantastic Elliott Hudson College, which I recently visited, for the great work that it does in educating our constituents, both young and old.

5.42 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker.

I welcome this debate; the number of signatures shows how important the issue is. It is really important to people in my constituency because we do not have school sixth forms, so students have no choice but to go to a sixth-form college. Wigan and Leigh College offers the vocational route, and does it very well, but I will concentrate on the two outstanding colleges in my constituency that offer academic qualifications for students who might want to go on to higher education. It is their problems with the chronic and sustained underfunding that I will talk about today.

In the last two years, Winstanley College has been named Educate North's college of the year, Merseyside Educate's most inspirational 16 to 18 provider and, in April 2017, the Times Higher Education sixth-form college of the year. In addition, it has been rated outstanding by Ofsted for the past 17 years, and has the matrix standard for excellence in support and guidance. It has no problems attracting students. This year, 16 students were offered places at Oxbridge, but it has had to cease offering German A-level. The principal said to me:

“We are lucky that, so far, we have not have to do more but we cannot carry on like this.”

Difficult decisions will be made in the future.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware that children and young people from Knowsley travel to Winstanley College to do their A-levels and very much appreciate the education they get.

Yvonne Fovargue: Indeed, they travel from all over the north-west to attend Winstanley College. To have that college say that it does not think it can carry on offering those excellent qualifications is a tragedy for social mobility in the area.

St John Rigby College is the other college in my constituency. It is also an award-winning college. I am pleased to say that the title of Educate North's sixth-form college of the year happily stayed in Makerfield, as it passed from Winstanley to St John Rigby, which has also won the award of most inspirational 16 to 18 provider.

The principal feels that, although students continue to get excellent qualifications, their experience is not as rich as that of their counterparts a few years ago, because every year something has to be removed from what was previously provided as part of the overall educational experience. Students are getting less specialist teaching than they did three years ago. St John Rigby is a highly inclusive college that really supports its students through the academic route, but students are now taught their specialist subjects for 20 minutes fewer per subject per week than three years ago. That is nearly three weeks' worth of lost teaching per academic year.

There are increased class sizes, with approximately two extra students per group than four years ago. The college tries to support every individual student, but increased class sizes reduce the amount of time teachers can spend with students. They also increase the workload of the teachers, giving them more marking and making them less accessible out of lessons. Enrichment opportunities have decreased.

The college has maintained its focus on employability skills and career pathways, but that has been possible only because of the cuts that I have mentioned. The activities that have declined are the recreational activities, which play an important part in student wellbeing and mental health. St John Rigby has chosen to put its primary investment into teachers and quality of learning, but its capital investment has reduced to half of what it
was four years ago. There has been a decline in the college infrastructure and the estate. That cannot continue much longer.

The principal said to me:

“It feels as though each and every year we are faced with an unacceptable decision of which priority (which just about survived the previous year’s prioritisation exercise) can no longer be provided”.

That is simply not good enough in an area where social mobility is extremely low. How are my students from the Wigan borough supposed to continue to have high aspirations and become more socially mobile when their access to further education courses, and support from the staff who teach those courses, is being continually restricted by lack of funding? More broadly, with the challenges of Brexit, how are we going to produce the competitive and educated workforce of the future if there is systematic underfunding of post-16 education?

Those colleges are doing their best to support students who wish to take an academic route. Investment in T-levels and vocational education should be applauded, but it does nothing for Winstanley and St John Rigby, and for those students who want to take a different route. Therefore, for the sake of our future, the Government have to look at raising the rate of 16 to 18 education to £4,760 per student and, crucially, keeping the rate at least in line with inflation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. If everybody keeps to six minutes, we should get there. I call Mr Wragg.

5.48 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Walker. As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on introducing the debate. As well as Coventry College, we have a special needs college in Coventry that does excellent work but is struggling financially and in its resources. In combination, they have faced cuts of up to about 27%. Does the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) agree that that is a major factor affecting the quality of apprenticeships? Companies such as Jaguar Land Rover in the west midlands industrial base want to expand, but for that to happen, they need the skills.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on introducing the debate. As well as Coventry College, we have a special needs college in Coventry that does excellent work but is struggling financially and in its resources. In combination, they have faced cuts of up to about 27%. Does the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) agree that that is a major factor affecting the quality of apprenticeships? Companies such as Jaguar Land Rover in the west midlands industrial base want to expand, but for that to happen, they need the skills.

Mr Wragg: I certainly agree. I am pleased to have afforded the hon. Gentleman the opportunity to place on the record the work of colleges in Coventry.

It is a timely coincidence that the Education Committee, of which I am a member and which my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) always chairs most ably, is conducting an inquiry into school and college funding and has taken evidence from the post-16 sector. When we asked what was at the top of their wish list, witnesses agreed that the first priority is higher core funding, the second is separate funding for increases to teachers’ pay awards and pensions, as occurs in schools, and the third is increased funding for the capital expansion of colleges.

We also heard that the college sector would much rather have a boost to core funding than a continued run of new initiatives. Some witnesses spoke of an initiative mania and suggested that narrowly targeted uplifts can do more harm than good, because they displace the real issue. For instance, plans to invest in technical education, although welcome, will do very little for the vast majority of sixth-form students who study an A-level or applied general course. I am afraid that more money for T-levels is not, in itself, the solution to sixth form and college funding.

To ensure that schools and colleges can continue to deliver high-quality, internationally competitive education, the “Raise the Rate” campaign is calling for the national funding rate for 16 to 18-year-olds to be raised by £760 per student at the forthcoming spending review and in line with inflation each year thereafter, as the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) mentioned.
Recent research has found that that is the minimum additional funding required to increase student support services to the required level, including improving students’ mental and physical health. It is needed to protect subjects that are at risk of being dropped, such as modern foreign languages. It will increase non-qualification time and extracurricular activities, work experience and university visits, which are vital for preparing students for the world of work or higher education and are key drivers of social mobility. Furthermore, it is important that the rate rise comes in addition to—not instead of—the funding that may be required by schools and colleges to meet new costs, such as increased employer contributions to the teachers’ pensions scheme.

I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister is a big supporter of the further education sector and wants the very best for pupils. We have seen that support take different forms; I am sure her winding-up speech will remind us about the new per pupil premium funding for level 3 maths, the £40 million of funding to establish centres for excellence in maths, and the investment in T-levels. However, I encourage her to go beyond those initiatives and ask the Chancellor for the desperately needed raise in the rate of core sixth-form funding. I can think of no better Minister to negotiate on behalf of the college sector, and I wish her well in the spending review.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Wera Hobhouse. I am still quite keen on the six-minute limit.

5.55 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I cannot think of an issue more important than education. At the heart of a functioning society is the education system, but ours is being cut to the point where it is barely fit for purpose. Further education is the worst-funded part of the already cash-strapped system—the only part of the education budget to have had year-on-year cuts for the past 10 years.

I know that it is fashionable to blame the coalition Government. However, coming from a different cultural background, in which practical education is much more valued, I must say that the malaise is much deeper and has gone on for a lot longer. What we are looking for is a culture change that gives further education the same value as university education. That is what we need to achieve, and I hope that we will get cross-party support for it.

[MR PETER BONE IN THE CHAIR]

As the Institute for Fiscal Studies recently pointed out, funding for 16 to 19-year-old education has fallen by 8% and the adult education budget has been cut by 45%. These are massive, massive cuts that severely affect students, staff and everyone in the further education community. More than 24,000 teaching staff have been lost from the sector since 2009, and 90% of colleges report difficulties in attracting the staff they need. The sector is haemorrhaging talent and expertise—it really is a criminal waste of potential.

I was asked to attend this debate by a constituent who has significant experience in the field, both as a student and as a teacher. She says:

“People who emerged from school with few qualifications are now training and working as nurses, paramedics, social workers, vets, and many valuable careers because they had their chance at an FE college. It is this knowledge that keeps me working in the field despite dwindling resources and diminishing financial rewards.”

Further education is vital to social mobility, to training people for key worker roles, and to the principle that this country invests in its people, regardless of their background. In Bath, we are lucky to have a very well-performing college, Bath College, which demonstrates time and again that young people do not have to go to university to do well in life. Businesses in Bath need young people who are work-ready, with specific skills, and Bath College provides just that. However, like most further education colleges, it is really struggling. This morning, the principal, Laurel Penrose, told me:

“The strain is telling on staff and the offer and delivery is starting to be compromised because we cannot invest in the infrastructure and develop the capital enhancements we need to remain at the industrial standards required by our technical subjects. We are a unique educational sector, one that is recognised for our flexible approach and one with many of the solutions needed to address the skills deficit being experienced by this country—but we cannot grow or invest because of the funding.”

I really hope that the Minister is listening to all of us across the House. Some of Mrs Penrose’s staff went out on strike last year; I supported that strike, but it could have been completely avoided if the sector were funded to allow staff pay equal to that in other parts of the education sector. The Government are failing to properly fund further education, and it sends a very strong message. As a country, we need to get over the idea that university is the only option for people who want to do well in life. Further education colleges have an important role in the education mix in this country. The Government should take that role seriously, and not just with words.

Liberal Democrat support for lifelong learning is very strong. As has been mentioned, our leader—my right hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable)—is a passionate supporter of further education. He has launched the Independent Commission on Lifelong Learning, which is investigating the best ways to make sure that adults have access to learning and retraining throughout their lives. This could take the form of giving each person in this country a learning account, which they could use for education in the way they want. I very much hope that that is being looked into further.

Well-funded education is vital. We need to place opportunity in the hands of individuals and give them the tools that they need to make the most of their lives and reach their full potential. Without proper resources, we are failing a large number of people across our communities, and we must do a lot better. Further education has been the Cinderella of the education system—I remind everybody that Cinderella was always the hardest-working member of her family. We should value the immense contribution to this country made by FE colleges and their past, current and future students. We must value the sector and fund it properly.

6 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the remainder of this debate, Mr Bone. I have been lobbied strongly, repeatedly and effectively by the excellent further education college in my constituency, namely Petroc. The staff, pupils and management team have been assiduous in ensuring that they get their message across. It is an excellent further education college and has two campuses. I am proud to say that the main one is in Barnstaple in my North Devon constituency, and it has a second
[Peter Heaton-Jones]
campus in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). Between them, they educate or train about 10,000 people across all age groups every year.

As part of the communication that I have had with the college, I received a letter only a few weeks ago. It is worth quoting the principal’s statement on the college and the work it does. Diane Diamond, the principal and chief executive officer of Petroc, says:

“As a leading further education college, you will know that we are an essential part of the region’s education system. Whether it’s through top-class technical education, apprenticeships, A-levels, basic skills or lifelong learning, we help people of all ages and backgrounds across Devon and beyond to make the most of their talents and ambitions. Rooted in the local community, I feel we are crucial in driving social mobility and providing the skills to boost local and regional economies.”

I agree with Diane: she is absolutely right. I would add one thing: further education colleges such as Petroc play a vital role in driving the Government’s industrial strategy, and they are really important. They have lobbied me on two main issues, which I want to represent to the Minister. First, the general sense is that funding for students in the 16 to 18 further education sector has not kept up; it has fallen in real terms since 2010, which compares unfavourably with both the 11 to 16 sector and the post-18 sector. That sense of an unlevel playing field has come through loud and clear in what Petroc has said to me. It suggests that further education is, I am afraid to say, the poor relation, especially when we look at the work that the Government are doing to improve funding of, for instance, the secondary schools sector. I have had many conversations about this with Ministers at the Department for Education. I feel that we are making progress there, but we are not making progress with the FE sector.

The second issue that Petroc raised with me is that the salary of lecturers and teachers in FE colleges has not kept pace with the pay of those who teach the same age groups—16 to 18-year-olds—in sixth-form colleges. This seems slightly perverse, because there are more 16 to 18-year-olds studying at further education colleges than at secondary schools that still retain a sixth form. I have had many conversations about this with Ministers at the Department for Education. I feel that we are making progress there, but we are not making progress with the FE sector.

Petroc has two asks, which I echo. The first is to look into increasing the funding of FE colleges at a sustainable level, as called for in the petition. The second is to consider providing some exceptional, ring-fenced funding to cover the costs of a fairer pay deal for the lecturers and teachers who work so hard in the 16 to 18 further education college sector. Petroc has had significant investment in recent years, and I want to stress that it has great new facilities. It has been my pleasure to visit Petroc College, which have been echoed by hon. and right hon. Members of different parties. The name of this campaign is “Love Our Colleges.” I know the Minister loves our colleges and I ask her to spread that love a little more effectively, particularly in the direction of North Devon.

6.6 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you presiding over our business this afternoon, Mr Bone. I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones).

What has been striking in this debate is the consistency of the message from Members of different parties—not just, predictably, from the Opposition, but from the loyalists on the Government Benches. They include the Chair of the Education Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon); the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on education, the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns); previous Ministers of State at a number of Departments; and other colleagues who know the Minister much better than I do, and who speak of her commitment to further education. I hope she gets the message as strongly as it has been delivered, takes it back to reinforce the work that she is doing in the Department, and reinforces its battle with the Treasury to get the required funding.

I am grateful to Alison Arnaud of the Tower Hamlets campus of New City College for her briefing on local impacts; to Vanessa Donhowe of the Sixth Form Colleges Association and the “Raise the Rate” campaign for briefing on the national effects; and to the Library, as ever, for their assistance. I would like briefly to mention three issues: the overall funding rate, the specific rate for 16 to 19-year-olds, and the staffing pay levels. All have been mentioned in pretty much every single speech by colleagues.

As has been stated, the overall level of funding for 16 to 19-year-olds in schools, sixth-form colleges and FE colleges is allocated by the Education and Skills Funding Agency, using a simple national funding formula. A new formula based on learner numbers has been used since 2013-14 and replaced the old formula, which was based broadly on the number of qualifications taken. Based on figures in the ESFA account, expenditure on 16 to 19-year-old education decreased by about 11% in cash terms and 21% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2015-16. The 2015 spending review settlement included protection of the core adult skills participation budgets, and replaced the old formula, which was based broadly on the number of qualifications taken. Based on figures in the ESFA account, expenditure on 16 to 19-year-old education decreased by about 11% in cash terms and 21% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2015-16. The 2015 spending review settlement included protection of the core adult skills participation budgets in cash terms at £1.5 billion. Prior to that, spending on the adult skills budget fell by 32% in cash terms between 2010-11 and 2015-16.

On spending on 16 to 19-year-old education, the Library briefing reports that the Institute for Fiscal Studies 2018 annual report on education spending notes that “spending per student in an FE or sixth-form college is now about 8% lower than spending per pupil in secondary schools, having been about 50% greater at the start of the 1990s.” It concluded that 16 to 18 education in England “has been the big loser from education spending changes over the last 25 years” and spending fell more quickly during the 1990s and grew more slowly in the 2000s. It is “one of the few areas of education spending to see cuts since 2010.”
It reports several underspends. Spending on 16 to 19 education was £135 million lower than forecast in 2014-15, and £132 million lower in 2015-16. In 2016-17, spending was £106 million lower than expected, meaning that 1.8% of the budget was not spent. Sector spokespersons have raised concerns about budget underspends at a time of funding reductions, and have argued that the money should be used by the 16 to 19 sector and not redeployed to other ministerial priorities. I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that.

In Tower Hamlets—this affects young people in my constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali)—the minimum funding for a secondary school place is about £1,500 above what New City College gets per learner. On staffing pay, the Library also states that the School Teachers Review Body 2018-19 recommendations for paying allowances was an uplift of 3.5%, but as we have heard, the grant does not include further education and sixth-form colleges. That comes while the average national pay differential between a school teacher and an FE teacher is around £5,000; nearer to £7,000 in London; and there is an even wider gap in sought-after subjects such as maths.

The Minister will have seen the statistics published by the “Raise the Rate” campaign, which have been mentioned by other hon. Members. Fifty per cent. of schools and colleges have dropped courses in modern foreign languages; 34% have dropped STEM courses; 67% have reduced student support services, with significant cuts to mental health support, employability skills and career advice; and 77% are teaching pupils in larger class sizes. I would also be grateful if the Minister commented on that.

In conclusion, less money per pupil goes to colleges than to sixth forms in schools. There is less pay for teachers in colleges than for those in schools, and the overall funding for 16 to 19-year-olds and mature students is dropping overall in real terms. In February 2018, the Prime Minister announced that there would be a Government-led review of post-18 education, which would be supported by an independent panel. The panel should be publishing its report at an interim stage, with the Government concluding the review this year—I would be grateful if the Minister got us up to speed with the Government’ s priority of apprenticeships. It is the Government’ s priority of apprenticeships. It is the Government’ s priority of apprenticeships. It is the Government’ s priority of apprenticeships. It is

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6.11 pm  

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for getting the debate off to such a good start, and I congratulate the students from Brockenhurst College on their work to ensure that the debate took place.

We need not only to love our colleges, but to treasure and invest in them, because they are at the heart of our communities. They have connections to industry and commerce, help to power our communities, and are also engines of social mobility. All the evidence shows that colleges—more than any other institution—transform social mobility. For those reasons alone, we should do everything that we can to support them.

With the rise of the participation age, it is absolutely nonsensical that a youngster at the age of 16 to 18 should be funded 23% less than a youngster at the age of 15. That makes no sense at all, and the debate draws attention to that. I am really pleased to see the strength of opinion from across the House and that hon. Members know and understand the importance of the colleges in their communities. Today, that message has come through loud and clear to all of us.

The Minister really cares about colleges and is a passionate advocate for them, which we welcome, but she needs to deliver. In her response, she must tell us where the underfunding of colleges sits in the Department for Education’s priorities with the Treasury—is it first, second, third, or 27th? We need to be honest about that. I think people in this Chamber would agree that it would be the No. 1 priority if the Department really cared about social mobility and delivering the skill agenda that we need as we leave the European Union.

Skills are central. One of people’s main concerns during the referendum was the issue of migrant labour. If we are to tackle that problem, we need to invest in skills. Who better to invest in those skills than our colleges? They make the difference. For my pains, I ran a college for a number of years, which was probably a more challenging job than being a Member of Parliament. The challenges that principals face today are much greater than those that I confronted in 2010.

Principals can only balance certain things and manage certain variables. One of those variables is the curriculum. Hon. Members have talked about how the curriculum is shrinking, and that includes student support and enrichment, as well as the breadth of curriculum and the disappearance of STEM subjects, languages and so on. Another variable that we have talked about is the workload of teachers, who have to teach more periods, and therefore have larger classes. Class size is another variable. Only a certain number of variables can be played around with: class size, teacher workload and the curriculum. Principals handle and manage all those things. We are reaching breaking point.

Although we welcome the action on T-levels and additional support for maths, T-levels will not come through until 2022 and will not affect young people now, and the other changes are small beer. We need to ensure that the rate is raised for those doing the central work.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I echo my hon. Friend’s comments. I say on behalf of my colleges—Franklin College and Grimsby Institute—that his points are exactly right. The additional cost burdens of things such as general data protection regulation, which have not been factored in, all add to the costs pressures on colleges.

Nic Dakin: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. One the great colleges in my constituency, John Leggott College, which I was proud to lead, contacted me this week and said that the staff pay increases would be a real challenge for colleges. If the pension increases remain unfunded, that will represent the equivalent of six teacher posts. North Lindsey College also raised the issue of support for apprenticeships. It has had a massive 30% increase in apprenticeships this year to deliver on the Government’s priority of apprenticeships. It is concerned, however, about the potential cap to the funding of apprenticeships, which would really damage the investment that has been made in them.

I hope the Minister will give us reassurances that the strength and development of apprenticeships will not be badly affected by those changes. We need to raise the rate, treasure and invest in our colleges, and recognise that they are a key part of our future.
Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank the Petitions Committee for facilitating this important debate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for introducing it. I apologise for my intermittent coughing; I am afraid I have Brexit fever—it has affected us all in different ways. I shall persevere and press on regardless.

I will highlight some particular points that apply to my own college, East Durham College. I thank its excellent principal, Suzanne Duncan, and all the staff, for their hard work and dedication to the students in my constituency, and for giving me an insight into the funding issues that East Durham and other FE colleges face. I agree with many of the points made by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber about the unfair nature of funding. I hope that the Minister will address those points in her response.

The funding cuts for East Durham College, like many other colleges, have meant real-term cuts in staff pay, fewer teaching hours for students, bigger class sizes and less choice. The Department for Education has demanded more from teachers for the same funding, which has resulted in substantial additional workloads on top of delivering work experience, maths and English GCSE re-sits, and the careers strategy obligations. I am told that adult education funding is being cut by 45%.

Clearly, further education colleges are an essential part of England’s education system. Whether through top-class technical education, basic skills or lifelong learning, colleges help people of all ages and backgrounds to make the most of their talents and abilities. My college, based in Peterlee, is rooted in the local communities. It previously served the mining industry. It has developed and moved on, and is crucial in driving social mobility and providing the skills boost to the local and regional economy.

It is fundamental—indeed, it is essential in constituencies such as mine—that colleges are properly funded. We heard that college funding was cut by around 30% between 2009 and 2019. I listened to the contributions by the hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). I do not know whether they have experienced the same problems, but we have fewer hours of teaching and less support for young people, and we have seen a drastic reduction in learning opportunities for adults. We know the value of staff pay has fallen by more than 25%, and many Members have pointed out that college teachers earn £7,000 a year less than their colleagues who teach in schools. This situation simply is not sustainable, and it ultimately impacts college students, staff, businesses and the wider community.

I met the lobby group from Love Our Colleges, a coalition of trade unions, students, college leaders and people with a particular interest in colleges. As time is short, I will not go through its manifesto, but I hope the Minister studies it. As a result of this Government’s austerity policies, every part of the public sector is asking for more money. Many have good cases, but the case for funding post-16 education is simply that if we as a nation are going to fill our yawning and ever-widening skills gap, there is only so much we can do with what little colleges currently receive. Last year’s IFS report confirmed that the FE sector has been hit worse by austerity than any other part of the education sector. Spending on FE and adult education has fallen by almost £3.5 billion since 2010.

Several hundred of my constituents are among the signatories to the petition, which indicates the value we place on our college. I thank the students who launched the petition, and I hope the Minister can provide them with some comfort that FE providers will be properly funded and protected. I do not want her to be remembered as the Minister responsible for kicking away the ladders of opportunity that many in the Chamber took for granted when they were students. Education is an investment. I hope the Government commit to ensuring that every student receives a high-quality and comprehensive education.

6.22 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. Last Friday, I spoke to the principal of Portsmouth College, which I had the privilege of attending. What he told me was seriously concerning, and I am proud to be here to speak up for that college.

If we walked into a college in Canada, we would see sixth-formers receiving 26 hours of tuition per week. In Singapore, that figure is 27 hours, and in Shanghai it is 30 hours. We give our sixth-formers 15 hours of tuition per week. We owe our young people so much more. How can we expect future generations to compete on the world stage when we give them far less than their counterparts across the globe? If we want this great nation’s future to be as bright as its past, we need to invest in our young people.

Colleges educate nearly 65% of those who go on to higher education. Located both geographically and symbolically at the heart of our communities, colleges are a driving force for social mobility. All that is being put at risk. As we heard, colleges have had to deal with average funding cuts of 30% and soaring costs over the past 10 years. The effects have been severe. Those who attend state-run colleges have spent on them a third of what is spent on those who attend independent schools. In the past 10 years, qualifications in health and social care, engineering and plumbing have fallen by nearly 70% and, perhaps most significantly, IT qualifications have fallen by almost 90%.

The consequences are dire for everyone in our country, not just for our young people. Think of a world where we have hospitals but no nurses, where we can no longer construct buildings such as the Shard, the Spinnaker tower in Portsmouth or the Clifton suspension bridge in Bristol, and where we can no longer protect this country from the ever-growing cyber-security threats we face. That may sound bleak, but those will all be very real scenarios if we do not increase spending on sixth-form colleges.

Amanda Spielman, Her Majesty’s chief inspector, recently expressed her concern about college funding to the Public Accounts Committee, on which I sit. She wrote: “My strong view is that the government should use the forthcoming spending review to increase the base rate for 16 to 18 funding.”

Again, it seemed the Government had heard enough from experts; they chose not to take her advice. Instead, the national base rate for 16 and 17-year-olds was fixed at £4,000 per student, which obviously does nothing to account for the inflationary pressures and cost increases that our colleges face every year.
The solution to this problem is simple: we need to raise the funding rate from £4,000 per sixth-form student. Failure to do so would mean fewer young people realising their dreams, which would dramatically affect the economy and would undermine our nation’s capability in a global market. A small increase in funding would have an immeasurable effect on the nation’s future and would be a minor price to pay for its financial security. I am not alone in asking the Government to increase funding; it is what the staff of colleges such as Portsmouth College tell me they need, and Her Majesty’s chief inspector has said it is essential. College principals around the country have come forward in support of this fantastic petition. We need to safeguard the future of our country and our young people. We need to raise the rate for fantastic colleges such as Portsmouth College.

I pointed out earlier that had funding increased by inflation instead of being frozen, an additional £308 per pupil would be being spent in colleges across the country. I am told by the Library that there are around 8,500 young people between 16 and 18 in Stoke-on-Trent. A quick bit of maths tells us that that would amount to around £2.5 million across the three colleges in north Staffordshire, which would make a big difference to the life chances of the young people I represent.

I fear we are getting to the point where this is a zero-sum game. We had a lot of talk from many Members this afternoon about teachers’ pay, and the funding for high schools and further education. The reality is that we should not be pitting the funding for those up to the age of 15 against that of 16 to 18-year-olds. We certainly should not be trying to level down; we should be levelling up and recognising that if colleges are well funded, universities will have good-quality applicants who can go forward to take on high-quality graduate jobs.

If colleges are well funded, the skills gaps that we face in our communities, particularly those such as Stoke-on-Trent, can be met with ease. If we have well-funded colleges, we will attract the best and brightest staff, who in turn will inspire the next generation to go on and do the jobs that we know are important. Stoke-on-Trent is a city rich in talent and aspiration, but it sometimes struggles to turn that into tangible outcomes. The colleges in my constituency are among the few places that are working to nurture that talent and aspiration. When I visit the colleges in my constituency—I am sure the same is true for all other Members at the colleges in their constituencies—I see the bright young faces of people who have met an inspirational teacher or leader, who has helped them to take the next step towards achieving something great for themselves and their families.

In my constituency, all too often the first generation of a family is accessing further education. The young people who are going to college now are breaking with the things that have gone before, and they have a chance to go on and do better than their parents and grandparents. Often, they come back and inspire the next generation. I have met far too many young people who have gone on to further education and taken qualifications at a more challenging level only because their brother or sister went on such a programme. They have seen what their brothers, sisters and cousins can achieve, and they have emulated and replicated it. The more we can do to stimulate that sort of interaction, the better we can be in providing a college system that works.

That comes with funding. As my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) said, we need to love our colleges. We need to spread that love further, but we cannot spread it more thinly. There simply has to be more love to go around. Investing in our colleges is investing in our future, in our young people and in the future of our country. I know the Minister takes it seriously. The responses I have received to my education questions show that she knows this is a battle that needs to be had with the Treasury. All of us here today are willing to stand with her as she has that battle for the funding that we need.

6.31 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I feel as though we can achieve something
that is perhaps unachievable at this moment in any other issue or in other areas of the House—that is, a little bit of consensus and cross-party working. Perhaps that will set a good example to other right hon. and hon. Members, because it is achievable.

So far, all the contributions have been supportive of FE. In the grand tradition mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), every argument has been made. We have all heard the powerful and persuasive reasons why FE matters so much, and I will not use every moment I have to repeat them all. There is, however, an argument that has not been made as much. Members have talked powerfully about the skills shortage and the need to address it—I will mention the particular difficulties around implementing the NHS 10-year plan in a moment—but colleges have another role, which has been completely downplayed, and that is to be the heart of the community.

For some people, such as adults with learning difficulties, colleges are a social place. For adults who may be struggling with their mental health, or for people whose lives have not worked out in the way we would all have liked, colleges can offer social interaction, a place to go and a purpose for getting up in the morning. I have heard that from constituents who have struggled with their mental health, but who wanted to go and complete their course. A really nice gentleman, who has some learning difficulties, loves to show me all his certificates, which he carries around in his backpack, because he is very proud of them. I know that the college is often just finding reasons to allow him to keep going, because he has a wonderful time there and it is a social event for him. The argument for skills is pivotal, but I put it to the Minister that we should also have an argument for colleges being part of the community. Is it really so bad for society that for some people, colleges are a social place where they can go and interact with others? Can we look at the funding streams to address that? At the moment, it feels as though there is no funding for a course if there is no qualification at the end of it.

Sir John Hayes: What a delight to hear the hon. Lady say that. She is making the case for continuing lifelong and community learning, some of which does not necessarily have an economic purpose. Politicians have become so insecure and emasculated that they are reluctant to make a case for things that cannot be measured in precise terms. She is making a case for joy, and education should be about joy. That is why it is such a tragedy that adult community learning has declined since the days when the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) and I defended its budget.

Emma Hardy: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that has declined. I know that because after giving birth, a friend of mine wanted a reason to get out of the house and not have the baby with her for a while, so she managed to sign me and herself up for salsa classes. I was quite disappointed because I was taller and had to be the bloke, so now I can salsa but only if I take the male role in the pair. This was something that my friend did after giving birth, when she wanted to get out of the house and find something else to do. I fear we are losing that role for colleges.

I return to the point about the NHS and the skills shortage. The 10-year plan for the NHS is welcome, but in a report the director of the Royal College of Nursing said:

“This report confirms our greatest fear—that the impressive ambition of the long term plan could be derailed, simply because we do not have the nursing staff to deliver it.”

The Minister might be expecting me to plug the fact that Hull College has set up a nursing apprenticeship, which I think is really exciting. In a different debate at a different time, with pretty much the same Members, I spoke about the need for progression from level 2 to a degree apprenticeship to be clearly defined and mapped out, so that each individual can see how one moves on to another. That is exactly what has been done at Hull College, which has taken people at 16 years old from a level 2 qualification in health and social care and given them a pathway right through to a nursing degree apprenticeship. I have mentioned to the Minister before that we need to have a clear pathway and progression mapped out, from levels 2, 3 and 4 all the way up.

The Education Committee visited Germany to look at lifelong learning. Quite a few people have mentioned the challenges of automation—it is both a challenge and something to be excited about—that present problems around lifelong learning and how to upskill people in this country. In Germany, they are already starting to do that in a programme called Industry 4.0, which is happening across the country. I feel as though we are already quite far behind, and they have moved on with this. We do not want to be a country that is left even further behind, especially after Brexit.

Robert Halfon: The hon. Lady and I work together on the Select Committee. She is making one of the best speeches of the afternoon, particularly when it comes to the importance of FE as social capital. When FE colleges in areas that have very little economic capital are weakened, the community is destroyed. What she says about Germany is incredibly important. She will know that 50% of German students go on to do further or technical education, as do 70% of Swiss students, because we went to both those places. Those countries have Governments that are investing in FE and giving it equality with academic education, and we should closely follow their example.

Emma Hardy: It will be no surprise to the right hon. Gentleman that I completely agree with him, and I share his passion for that. In a previous debate on the subject, I made the point that if we want such parity of esteem, we need parity of outcome. Germany’s model has no dead ends. If someone starts on a vocational route, they can move across, between vocational and academic, and back. They can get to degree level through a vocational route, if they want to. That is why I feel as though T-levels are a distraction, as I have mentioned to the Minister before. That is, unfortunately, where we disagree.

To conclude, of course I support “Raise the Rate”. It is crucial that we have more money for our pupils. I am proud that the Labour party has an inspiring national education service vision for everyone to get behind. I put on record my thanks to all the staff at Hull College and at Wyke Sixth Form College—which is where I went, so I especially like that one—for all their hard
work and for everything they do for all the pupils in Hull. I implore the Minister to consider that skills, progression and future matter, but so do a sense of belonging and a sense of community; those are the other things that FE provides.

6.39 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on the excellent speech she gave just now, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on introducing this important debate. There is no doubt that with a little more time and spending for FE, we could be less worried about loneliness, which is a current policy concern.

There is no such thing as a job for life, and with the possibility of an election in the air there is nothing dearer to our hearts than the sense that MPs may not have a job for life either. Who knows whether any of us may end up at our FE college at a not-too-distant time, seeking extra courses?

There has been poor retention in apprenticeships for several years, and we all know how crucial it is to get the apprenticeship workstream right. To date that has not happened, but my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle mentioned how important it is, from the beginning of the course, to make the pathway clear so that students can see what happens at the end, and more students can be retained on their apprenticeships. It is a pleasure to have some students here with us in Westminster Hall.

I want to thank Kurt Hintz, the principal of the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London, which is now part of a consortium of three or four colleges—the largest FE provider in London. There have been pluses and minuses for the teaching in north London as a result of that. Personally, I think the college achieved more before, when it could focus on a smaller population group, but we are where we are. A number of teachers have come to see me, including in the autumn, when the University and College Union organised a parliamentary tour to see MPs. A teacher of English as a second language, who is incredibly committed to what she teaches, pointed out that whereas an average secondary school teacher is paid £37,000, she is paid only £30,000. Many hon. Members have made the case for raising the rate and cancelling out that discrepancy.

Some hon. Members have pointed out that a 67% drop in the welfare workstream, and in extracurricular activity, arts and music, means a much diminished offer to students. I have seen from my casework how much work welfare officers do in the college and how they keep students at college, which is crucial to their mental health.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I attended an FE college, and it saved my life. I was struggling in the chemical industry and had lost my way. Going to FE college saved my life and career. I was a mature student, transferring, and the welfare and the support was wonderful. I just want that for every student in every FE college; they are the heart of our skills environment in this country.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend has repaid his debt to the college sector by committing himself to lifelong learning and apprenticeships. That includes the importance of learning as a part of industrial strategy, especially for towns, where colleges do important work in many pockets of deprivation, in England in particular.

I want to mention the gender and black and ethnic minority pay gaps. Someone who does not get a strong offer in college is likely to enter the workforce on lower pay. That surely has something to do with the fact that so many women and black and ethnic minority members of the workforce are paid less. The Department should surely look into that and rectify it.

Some Members have raised the question of STEM. The 24% drop in the STEM offer in the college sector is a terrible step backwards. What is being done to tie up the FE sector with huge public procurement projects such as Crossrail, the super-sewers project and High Speed 2? Could not some of the money be spent in colleges, to make links? When a big project such as the Thames tideway tunnel finishes, could that tunnelling expertise not then be lent to another high-value expensive public procurement exercise elsewhere? I know that other hon. Members want to speak. We must redouble our efforts and together with the Minister, who I know is committed to this area, as well as the Chairman of the Education Committee, put pressure on the Treasury and make the case for lifelong learning.

6.45 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the petitioners who got the petition going, and every one of the 70,000 people who signed it. It shows that when people get behind the further education sector, it can make an impact here. The quality and number of contributions to the debate says it all.

I want to talk about the impact of further education in my family. My son recently completed his second year mid-term exams at the University of Hull, but when he left school at the age of 16 no one would have expected him to go to university. It was the contribution of the further education sector—specifically Chesterfield College—that enabled him to go on to do well at university. Many of us recognise that a lot of children do not do well at school, and further education can have a transformative impact on them. I am worried that the education system is becoming a one-chance saloon. Adolescents can, as we all know, go through all kinds of crises. It is important that they get a second chance.

Chesterfield College plays an incredibly important role in the community, and not just through the services it provides at various levels to the 10,000 people who attend it. It is also as an employer and as a customer of Chesterfield’s businesses that it needs support. It also played the crucial role of providing my Christmas card this year—something that I am sure all those who received it will not have forgotten.

Further education is important for children who did not do all that well at school, but who have huge potential for academic study after their love of learning is developed by the sector. It also provides an important service to children who did well at school but want a different kind of study. It provides a kind of education with more freedom, much more like the university experience. It is also important for children who want to pursue non-academic study and to develop skills.
Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. I was a secondary school teacher. The focus on university education has such an impact on the whole school system that I believe if we considered greater parity, there would be a positive effect on teaching at key stages 3 and 4. It would make things far more interesting for a vast number of young people.

Toby Perkins: I agree entirely. A diverse education system is incredibly important for any country that wants to be competitive in the global race. I am worried that we are leaving far too many people behind, which I think is the point the hon. Lady is making.

Further education is important for many people with special educational needs who leave school but are not yet ready for the world of work, and who want to develop their skills. It is important to see education as not purely about the jobs people will do, but about their development in a variety of ways. That relates to FE’s role in supporting people who are recovering from a crisis. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) spoke about that.

Often the move to do a further education course is a step towards the world of work. It might be a flower-arranging course, first aid or any number of things that do not end up being a job, but that offer a starting point for people who are at a moment in their lives where they need something to give them a sense of hope. Of course, further education is also important for people looking to boost their skills and accelerate their career development.

Further education colleges play a core role in providing apprenticeships, particularly in the small business sector, where businesses do not have all the skills that our major employers have. I am worried that much of the progress made in the last 12 or 15 years on apprenticeships is being lost because of the apprenticeship reforms. Apprenticeships are not just about the Rolls-Royces of this world, and colleges play an important role in enabling apprenticeships to happen in our small business sector. I am also worried about the huge numbers of experienced lecturers who are leaving the sector, which is leading to college closures. We heard from the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) that 3,000 have left the profession. That is a huge number of dedicated, skilled, experienced people lost from this crucial sector.

Today’s debate is about loving our colleges; we have had the call and we have heard from Members of Parliament on both sides of the Chamber that we all love our colleges, but it is important that the Government give some meaning to those words and ensure that the money backs that love. We can all speak about the importance of further education, but it is important that we have the resources to do that.

Further education colleges are reporting huge increases in the mental health problems they have to deal with—those statistics have already been quoted—and there is a problem. Colleges must be able to help people with mental health problems get the training or education they need, but to do that they need the resources. In the context of constantly diminishing resources, they just do not have the capacity to do the sort of work that is necessary.

This has been a good debate and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to take part in it. I hope that when the Minister comes to reply, she will address the funding problem that so many hon. Members have mentioned. I hope she will look at simplifying the apprenticeship funding system and take into account the comments that have been made about mental health problems.

6.55 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on introducing this Petitions Committee debate today. I will try not to repeat the many points that have been made by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber.

On her first day, the Prime Minister promised to tackle the “burning injustices” of society, with the implication that everyone in Britain, whatever their background and age, would be able to succeed. Here we are confronted with another example of deed not following word: the cuts to our further education system.
In December, I visited West Thames College in Isleworth in my constituency, which was largely rebuilt thanks to the decision of the Labour Government in 2010 and now has amazing student and technical facilities from that major capital build. The college provides a wide variety of courses, including world-renowned specialist hair and make-up degrees, whose graduates get jobs in the west end and in the film and TV industry; a range of vocational courses designed in conjunction with local employers, such as in aviation and logistics, where we have a local skill shortage; and courses in English as an additional language to enable young people recently arrived in the country to make progress in education and employment. There is specialist support for those who need additional support to access mainstream courses, and specialist courses for students with severe or complex disabilities. There is also a programme for 14 to 16-year-olds who have not coped in school for various reasons, such as health or family problems.

When I visited in early December, I met a number of students on a variety of courses—students such as Page and Rosie, who were aged 18. Each had struggled for different reasons when younger and had missed a lot of school, but West Thames is providing them with the tools to catch up on their core skills and give them career hopes—Page in bridal hair and Rosie in car mechanics. I met 32-year-old Katrina, who is doing an access to social work course. As the lone parent of a disabled child, she has struggled to pursue a career or even, at times, to get a job. She told me how the course will enable her to apply to university and hopefully achieve her dream of becoming a professional social worker.

Uplifting as their stories are, the students on the different courses raised concerns with me about problems they had experienced recently: cuts to the teaching hours that are needed to cover the breadth of the curriculum on their courses; cuts in courses such as employability, which are so important in helping them to get a job; concerns about the provision of up-to-date specialist equipment and software, because they are changing all the time and the college needs to keep up with the changing needs of employers; and overstretched special needs and mental health support. The college is also suffering from the decimation of adult learning, with fewer and fewer adults able to attend the college.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I was lucky enough to benefit in 2008 from retraining through adult education. Does my hon. Friend agree that the great benefit of further education is the richness and breadth it can provide, and the diversity of courses that does not exist anywhere else? We are seeing 30% cuts at Warwickshire College Group, which has 29,000 students and provides a huge benefit across Warwickshire.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The decimation of adult courses has been brought about partly through the ending of student support for over-19s. The students and colleges are dealing with that cliff edge, which comes when students reach 19. Aviation and ICT course students told me that more than half the students left at the end of level 2, because they no longer got funding. They therefore missed out on level 3, which is the best gateway to jobs.

West Thames College, like many others, has lost 30% of its funding in the last 10 years, while costs, as other hon. Members have said, have been rising. Students told me that they respected their tutors greatly and could not understand how they earned £7,000 less than equivalently experienced schoolteachers. The West Thames principal, Tracy Aust, made it clear to me that this situation, with all these problems, is not sustainable and ultimately impacts not only on students but on staff, businesses, our communities and our wider economy.

How can Government Members wring their hands about UK productivity and then oversee the decimation of the education and skills training that is fundamental to the productivity that this country so badly needs? How can they wax lyrical about social mobility and then withdraw or underfund the options that enable people to aspire and achieve?

7 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and to hear so many excellent contributions.

It is no secret that this Government are presiding over rising inequality in education. All 26 schools in my constituency face real-terms cuts to their budgets; university tuition fees have risen threefold; and maintenance grants and education maintenance allowance has been scrapped, hitting students from the poorest and most deprived households the hardest.

Colleges are a beacon of hope and opportunity in our local communities. As John van de Laarschot, chief executive officer of Nottingham College, says: “Rooted in local communities and with broad and deep links to local employers, Further Education Colleges like ours help people of all ages and backgrounds to make the most of their talents and ambitions through top-class technical education, basic skills and lifelong learning. We play a crucial role in driving social mobility and boost local and regional economic competitiveness.”

But colleges are dealing with sustained under-investment that is nothing short of a financial crisis.

Recently, the Institute for Fiscal Studies crowned further education “the biggest loser” in education over the last 25 years, and no wonder, as its research has revealed that since 2009 college funding has fallen by 30%, and funding per sixth-form student has fallen by 21% since 2010-11. Of course, we may soon say goodbye to European funding, which often helps colleges over the line.

This is all happening at a time when colleges’ costs have increased substantially. As has been recognised, the 16 to 18 budget has been frozen by this Government for seven consecutive years at £4,000 per student. A recent report by the Children’s Commissioner states that by the end of this decade, as a country we will be spending the same amount of cash per 16 to 18 student as we were in 1990. That simply cannot be right, especially when we know that the years from 16 to 18 are such a critical time in young people’s lives. It is the time when they often need the most support and when they face multiple pressures. From sitting or perhaps resitting some of the most important exams of their lives to deciding whether to apply to university or seek an apprenticeship, they are getting to grips with adulthood and making choices that will often shape their whole future. Too many students of that age face mental health problems, but a survey by the “Raise the Rate” campaign has found that many colleges are having to make significant cuts to mental health support just when it is most needed.
The continuing budget freeze, teamed with rising costs, means that ultimately colleges are being asked to do more with less. Nottingham College is currently working with a total income of £86.8 million—a 26% reduction since 2012-13. In the last year alone, it has rationalised sites and closed an on-site nursery. Of course, this is not happening just in my constituency. As we have heard, college students all over the country face less choice in the curriculum on offer and reductions in teaching and learning support, and they are often unable to access the same extracurricular activities, work experience opportunities and university visits as their peers in private and selective schools.

Adult further education, which plays a vital role in increasing social mobility, is also dependent on the success of our colleges, but funding has fallen by 45% in nine years, and enrolments of adult students have dropped from 5.1 million to just 1.9 million over the same period. Learning is not just for the young; it is something for all of us and we should be able to access it throughout our lives. As the nature of work changes, we need to be ready to reskill and retrain, to adapt to new technologies and take up new opportunities. The Government say that they are committed to increasing social mobility, yet funding for vocational and adult education has been decimated. Gone are the days of taking an evening class at a local college after work. The second chances that life-changing lifelong learning courses provide are being destroyed. As has been recognised, that not only makes people’s lives less fulfilling; in many cases, it just makes them less fun.

It is not just college students and potential learners who are affected by the lack of funding. Since 2009, college staff have seen their pay fall by 25%. According to the UCU, teachers in further education colleges earn on average £7,000 a year less than teachers in schools, often for the same work. No wonder that they have been leaving the further education sector in their droves. Since 2010, 24,000 have left, which is one third of the total teaching workforce. In Nottingham College alone, there has been a 34% reduction in teaching staff since 2012-13; the number has gone from 937 down to 616. Hard-pressed staff simply cannot be expected to continue doing more for less.

I am proud to speak today on behalf of Nottingham College’s 40,000 students and 1,500 staff. There is of course some good news: the new City Hub campus will provide excellent learning facilities and transform a brownfield city centre site.

We are asking the Minister to increase funding to sustainable levels. Will she give a guarantee of real-terms funding rises for the coming five years? Will she commit to extending the pupil premium to cover post-16 students? Will she ensure that everyone can access lifelong learning, particularly those who have not achieved a level 3 qualification? Will she ensure that colleges can offer their staff a decent pay deal this year and in the years ahead? We in this Chamber all love our colleges; I hope that our colleges love the Minister’s reply.

7.7 pm

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I did not intend to speak because I was a long time in the main Chamber for the Prime Minister’s Brexit statement, so thank you, Mr Bone, for giving me the opportunity. It is a perfect segue, because the chief executive of Nottingham College, John van de Laarschot, used to be the chief executive of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, next to my area. He is a good man, and I count him as a friend.

The Minister will know well from the correspondence that we have had over the last year that Newcastle-under-Lyme has an excellent college—I hope that she will visit us sometime soon. Its principal, Karen Dobson, was awarded an OBE in the new year’s honours list, in recognition of her efforts and those of her team. I played my part in getting a £5 million contribution from the old Advantage West Midlands to make the construction happen, because there was no better argument for investment in regeneration than investment in people’s futures and in their further education.

I want to make one wider point, with the Chair of the Education Committee here, to the Minister. In Newcastle, since the reorganisation in the 1980s, there is only one school, St John Fisher, a Catholic school, that has a sixth form; everybody else goes to the college, more or less. Therefore, excellent though the college is, this is not simply a matter of choice. My plea to the Minister is that, be it on per-pupil funding or on teachers’ pay, the playing field between school sixth forms and FE colleges simply must be levelled. Not only is the current situation unfair to pupils and teachers; it discriminates against areas like mine in north Staffordshire, Newcastle and Stoke-on-Trent, which have a different school and college structure. I hope that in the coming days, weeks and months, as the Minister goes in to bat in the Treasury, her Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), will pursue that argument with her vigorously.

7.9 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is an enormous pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and that of your predecessor in this debate, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker). It has been an absolute joy—to echo the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes)—to be in this debate and to hear the unanimous view about what needs to happen in this sector. The Minister has been showered not only with an avalanche of statistics but, more importantly, with evidence of the life-enhancing chances that further education and skills can bring.

The case has been made with an eloquence and urgency that demands a response not only from the Minister—I am sure it will be good—but from the Secretary of State for Education, because he needs to put his shoulder to the wheel in the discussions with the Treasury. I know that the Minister will do her best in that area, but if the Secretary of State for Education does not get that money through and if the Chancellor does not come back and respond to the abject failure in his Budget, none of them will be forgiven. That is the crux of what we have been talking about.

I do not have the ability to praise all the hon. Members who made speeches, but I certainly praise the 70,000 people who signed the petition. I praise all the excellent briefings from the Association of Colleges, the Sixth Form Colleges Association, Unison and the UCU, and all the individual colleges, principals and staff, as well as the many individual students, whom hon. Members have quoted. I pay particular
tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who spelled out to the Minister in simple, cogent and thoughtful terms the challenge of a divided country that has been left behind; the challenge to make this a newsworthy crusade, which it has not been in the past; and the challenge simply to understand and to question why this has happened.

When EMA was abolished in 2010, £555 a year was being spent; why do we now have 16 to 19 bursaries at only a third of that value? Why, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said, has the concept of night schools been left behind? Why has this funding been frozen at £4,000? Those issues have not just dropped into the Minister’s tray; they have been in the trays of the four Skills Ministers that I have shadowed since 2011.

I cannot touch on everything that has been said, but I would like to highlight some points. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) talked about the issues with T-levels, as have many other people. If I had more time, I would talk more about T-levels, not to attack them, but to say that they are doing a very different job, and even that job is being hampered by a series of things.

The right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who is the respected Chair of the Education Committee, was absolutely right to talk about the different ages at which people get second chances and to challenge the Government on building new colleges. I absolutely agree with him: what is the point of building new colleges or new institutes of this, that or the other, if there are inadequate staff to take those courses through and inadequate funding to sustain them? That is the challenge for the Government. This requires a long-term strategy and a 10-year plan.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) gave a fantastic speech lauding her own FE college. She also pointed out the dire problems for smaller towns—she was absolutely right to talk about the tragic situation of Manchester Metropolitan University—which were expressed by many hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) praised the principal of a college in his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) summed up further education as a beacon of hope and opportunity.

Those are the sorts of questions that come to this Chamber. It is sad that we have to revisit these voices of challenge and hope, because we were all led to believe—as the Minister said in perfectly good faith—that the unprecedented campaign in the autumn would produce a result. That is why, in October last year, I wrote to the Chancellor to request an urgent uplift in this area.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the shadow Minister, but there is a Division in the House. If there is one Division, we will suspend for 15 minutes. If there is more than one Division, please try to return as soon as possible.

7.17 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

7.42 pm

On resuming—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. The debate will resume with the shadow Minister, and we will now conclude at 7.55 pm.

Gordon Marsden: As I was saying, these cuts have been very severe. There has been a real-terms cut of anything between 50% and 60% in the budget for adult education, as well as cuts in the budgets for further education and sixth-form funding—which, of course, is why the “Raise the Rate” campaign has been doing what it has been doing. The truth of the matter is that, as Amanda Spielman said, “I am firmly of the view that the government should increase the base rate for 16 to 19 funding in the forthcoming spending review.”
We really do have to go down that route. We cannot repeat the situation of being marched up to the top of the hill and down again, as we were with the Chancellor.

There are so many aspects of tonight’s debate that I could talk about, but I do not have the time to do so. However, I particularly want to ask the Minister whether she is going to do anything to make sure that the Augar review rebalances the rates between students in FE and HE, and whether that will be a priority in the spending review. We also know about the issues with the financial health of colleges and insolvency; what is the Minister going to be doing in that area? We know that policy makers have not looked holistically at that area, and we need to have that holistic approach.

Because this Government have failed to take a holistic approach, because they have not looked at human capital as well as physical capital, and because the advanced learner loans have been a continuing disaster, we need to have a transformation. We need to have parity of esteem, and that can only be achieved through the sorts of structures that the Labour party are proposing: the national education service and the lifelong learning commission. Having spent 20 years as a lecturer in the adult learning sector, and having seen the powerful effect of FE in my own college in Blackpool, I believe that there is no better way of dealing with this issue than having that step change, not just of funding, but of vision and structure.

7.44 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this important debate, and I offer particular congratulations to the A-level politics students of Brockenhurst College for having started the petition that underlies it. I think we can all agree that securing a debate in Parliament is a pretty impressive piece of A-level project work.

Gareth Snell: Will the Minister give way?

Anne Milton: No, I only have 10 minutes. I am so sorry.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) mentioned the Augar review, and he should be in no doubt that I have fed my feelings about further education into that review. It is an independent review, and we await it with anticipation; somebody asked about timescales, but I do not yet know when it will report. To reassure the hon. Gentleman, we certainly are not building any new colleges. Institutes of technology, which are possibly what he was referring to, are collaborations. That is not about new buildings; it is about collaborations between FE and HE.

I cannot rehearse all the valuable arguments that have been made, but we sometimes forget that despite all the challenges that FE faces, 81% of colleges are rated “good” or “outstanding”. However, I know that Ofsted has raised concerns about the financial stability of the sector and how finances constrain what FE colleges and sixth-form colleges can do, and of course we have heard a great deal about that today. The petition that underpins this debate was launched as part of the Association of Colleges’ campaign, “Love Our Colleges”, which I do. Campaigns such as this and “Raise the Rate” have helped raise the profile of this issue, and we have had 18 speakers today.

The hon. Member for Cambridge is right to talk about divisions; divisions in society underlie this whole debate. He is also right that further education has been left behind, not just in terms of finance but through the domination of the higher education sector, which has crowded out any conversation about further education and how crucial it is. We must ensure that everyone, whatever their age, background or prior educational attainment, can access the best opportunities that are available.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) mentioned those with special educational needs. As we all know, the further education sector offers a particularly high-quality opportunity to make sure that those young people have a chance to get on in their lives. To talk a little bit about mental health, I am acutely aware of the particular stresses that disproportionately affect young people in further education. We are creating new mental health support teams to address those needs, and we will work with colleges to identify and train designated senior leads for mental health to oversee mental health and wellbeing, with appropriate back-up support available. That is an important innovation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who is always eloquent, gave us probably the most succinct description of the problems we face. Higher education has dominated Governments of all political persuasions; everyone, including the media, talks incessantly about higher education, and I well remember that at the hustings at my local university during the 2017 election, I was asked about tuition fees. My response was, “What about the 50% who do not go to university?” That did not go down terribly well, but I felt strongly about this issue then, long before I took on this job. My right hon. Friend probably answered his own question about apprenticeships: we were determined to raise the quality of apprenticeships, to make them high quality, relevant to the workplace and, critically, designed by employers. Such major reforms have inevitably resulted in a reduction in the numbers of apprenticeship starts, although that has started to turn around. There has been a rise in the numbers of level 4 and 5 and degree apprenticeships, and they are becoming a route of choice instead of full-time higher education courses, which is excellent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) rightly pointed out the additional maths premium. I am not going to go through a whole raft of all the things we have funded, but she is right that overall funding has not kept up with costs. She is
also right that playing party politics does not help. I urge Members from all parts of the House to work together with me and with each other to ensure that we make the case. With the post-18 review looking at HE and FE, and with us also looking at the sustainability of the sector, that joint working is critical.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) mentioned the cross-party nature of the debate and asked about underspends. It is likely that the Department answer will state that any underspend is recirculated among other departmental priorities. I will see whether there are further details on that, but the money stays within education—although like him, I would like to see it spent on further education. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) asked me what the priorities are. I make no particular judgment about the various educational sectors, whether that is higher education or schools, but we hear a lot about schools funding and tuition fees and we do not hear much about FE. He also asked about the case for that funding, and there is a clear economic case and a productivity case. As a country, we cannot afford not to adequately fund the education of 50% of the population to ensure we have the skills we need. On a very personal level, it is about social mobility, community growth and the fact that everyone deserves a chance.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) mentioned mental health provision, which I have referred to, and the complex other needs of students in FE. Part of the case we need to make is that young people and adults often come into FE because their lives have been complex. Their learning needs are often not straightforward. Teaching and learning are only part of the job that FE staff do. There are often many other needs that must be met before any learning can begin to take place. I congratulate him on his thoughtful and collaborative approach. He is right that I need the help of all Members.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) is a real champion of her local college. She rightly raised the role that the college has played in her community, and it was a delight to hear her say that. That role is not measurable and is difficult to define, but it is of immense value. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) probably summed it up better than many. The hon. Lady talked about lifelong learning and how 35% of jobs are likely to disappear in the next 10 years due to automation. The national retraining scheme, where we are doing a lot of research into what works, has received £100 million from the Chancellor. There is collaboration between the TUC, the CBI and Government to address exactly the issues she raised.

I have talked about the sustainability of the further education sector and FE funding. In the run-up to the spending review, it is time to articulate the case for FE. We talk about it not being school or university, but we need a clear vision that everyone can get behind. We have identified some key issues about how we can put FE on a sustainable footing and deliver quality. There are many questions that we need to ask. How do we ensure a high-quality further education offer in each local area so that young people and adults have opportunities to develop their skills and employers can access the training and skilled recruits they need? We want FE to be sustainable. We know that area reviews have done some of the work, but there is probably more work and more collaboration to do. The 16 to 18-year-old population has been declining for several years, but we will see an increase after 2020. By 2028, there will be a quarter more 16-year-olds than there are today, so the problem is coming up behind us.

T-levels do not distract from the issue; they are an add-on. Often in parliamentary questions I give an answer about how much we are spending on T-levels. It is important. It is not a substitute for core funding, and I am aware of that. We also want to see a better and more visible offer for people at level 4 and level 5 in technical education. The Secretary of State emphasised that in his speech last month. What is the role of FE and HE institutions? What is the role of learning and grant funding? Those issues are all bound up in the post-18 review. There are also the key steps we have to take to help colleges recruit and train the teachers they need.

I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge again for securing the debate and I thank everyone for their contributions. I reassure Members that I will take the issues away and continue to champion FE as we prepare for the spending review. I reject any suggestion that I do not care about further education. I did not go to university; I went by a route that included further education, and I am the first to challenge the intellectual snobbery that pervades much of the mainstream media and broadcast media. We have to turn that around. I want a society where it does not matter where someone came from—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I apologise for the fact that the proposer of the debate did not get a chance to wind up, but time has beaten us.

7.55 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 22 January 2019

[James Gray in the Chair]

Water Industry

9.30 am

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the water industry in England and Wales.

Customers and employees should be helped to take back control of the companies providing our water and taking away our sewage. The people of England should once again be front and centre of their water industry. Democratic, publicly owned businesses operating in the private sector, regulated with vigour by a more effective Ofwat is the Co-operative party’s vision of the future of the water industry. I am proud to chair that political party. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to explore that agenda through this debate.

Nationwide, John Lewis, the Co-operative Group, the Royal London insurance company and NFU Mutual are just five successful examples of people-run businesses—mutuals—where profit is sought not to line the pockets of wealthy investors, but to reward customers and employees, and to invest in local communities. Such businesses are inspiration for reform of the water industry.

Margaret Thatcher’s decision 30 years ago to privatise our water industry has created an expensive, unaccountable and unfair system. No other country has a fully privatised system of water and sewage services with so little competition. The resulting monopoly businesses are overseen by a woefully weak water regulator. Unsurprisingly, the consumer voice in England carries little weight against the interests of distant investors, whose decisions have seen water bills rise by 40% above inflation since privatisation.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is an excellent opportunity to bring consumers into the conversation with businesses, in a way that mutualisation allows, so that we can learn from customers as well as talk about the ownership of utilities?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I will come on to how mutuals would allow customers to have a lot more say over—indeed, they would give them ownership of—the water services on which we all depend.

Turning to one specific company, Thames Water was owned for 11 years by a complicated string of holding companies and offshore businesses, all ultimately owned by Macquarie bank, receiving returns of between 15.5% and 19%. Research by the Financial Times suggests that between 2006 and 2016, Macquarie and its fellow investors paid themselves £1.6 billion in dividends, while Thames Water was loaded with £10.6 billion of debt and ran up a pension deficit of some £260 million.

Dividend, debt and pension deficit were not the only things to increase under Macquarie’s control of Thames Water; customer bills and complaints also soared. The only thing that went down during this period was customer satisfaction, which is now ranked 22nd out of 23 in the Consumer Council for Water league table.
**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate. Ofwat imposes no penalties on managers who break their commitments. Does he agree that legislation must be put in place to ensure that—at after loading Thames Water with debt and flooding the Thames valley with excrement—the water body faces more than just a fine that is less than the amount it would take to dispose of the water in the appropriate way? In other words, the fines do not match the crime.

**Gareth Thomas**: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. Given that we are in the middle of the latest pricing review, if Ministers had the gumption they could put pressure on Ofwat to use its existing powers to bear down on those exact issues. I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s general point that we need a full review of the powers available to Ofwat. I am sure that they need to be increased.

Thames Water’s credit rating is the worst in the industry, according to Standard & Poor’s. Thames Water’s tax bill also declined during the period in question, as it regularly paid no corporation tax on its £1.8 billion turnover. Thames Water is, by its own admission, failing to meet targets to reduce the number of properties experiencing chronic low water pressure; failing to reduce the number of complaints; and wasting almost 700 million litres of water annually through leakage. It is failing to meet basic standards in 17 out of 41 key areas. That dismal record also includes record fines for poor performance.

In comparison, Scottish Water, which is publicly owned, has debt levels 5% lower than 17 years ago; its interest payments have remained consistent; and, with no dividends having been paid out, all the profit has been reinvested. It is worth pointing out that, adjusted for leakage per kilometre of pipes, Scottish Water performs just as well as an average English company, with 10.2k litres of leakage per kilometre as opposed to 22.1k for Thames Water, 10.8k for United Utilities and 9.5k for Yorkshire Water.

Thames Water is not alone in poor performance. In truth, more than 20% of all water is currently lost through leakages from water pipes. In total, it is estimated that some 7.5 trillion litres of water has been lost through leakage, which is equivalent to the total volume of water currently in Loch Ness.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case against the water companies. The issue of leakage seriously needs to be addressed. Something like 1,273 Olympic-size swimming pools-worth of water is leaked daily because water pipes have not been addressed. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has rattled the cages of the water companies, to improve their performance, and they have set out in a new plan that they will reduce leakage by 16%. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that should not be done voluntarily and that there should potentially be stronger regulation?

**Gareth Thomas**: I find myself in the slightly unusual position of agreeing almost completely with the hon. Lady. Leakage is a huge problem. Much tougher regulation by Ofwat in particular, and ultimately an increase in the regulator’s powers, are required to bear down on the shocking levels of leakage, not least because the Environment Agency has said publicly that England and Wales could suffer major water shortages by 2030. The agency also noted that enough water to meet the needs of 20 million people is lost every day through leakage, which surely further supports her significant point.

To be frank, in the past Ofwat has not demanded enough investment from water companies, given the scale of the rise in customer bills. It appears to have been asleep at the wheel under various leadership teams. The Public Accounts Committee, which looked at regulation of the water industry as far back as 2015, criticised Ofwat for overestimating costs and poor benchmarking of efficiency, resulting in higher bills for customers.

The hon. Lady also made the point that even the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs suggested in March last year that water companies have not been acting in the public interest. Granted, the Secretary of State’s criticism came a month after a detailed critique of the water industry by the shadow Chancellor; nevertheless, the Secretary of State’s criticism is welcome.

As I indicated earlier, the latest price review is under way and already the Consumer Council for Water is concerned that Ofwat’s grand promises are unlikely to be met, with “companies bidding for significant rewards for performance levels that aren’t particularly stretching”.

In part, prices are decided by the cost of equity and the cost of debt, plus investors’ expected UK tax burden. In my view, Ofwat should reduce the cost of equity in its calculations while maintaining fair treatment on debt finance for genuine capital investment. In short, Ofwat should drive down the profit that the owners of water companies make. It should also scrutinise the tax behaviour of those owners, to crack down on tax avoidance, and demand that owners do not use tax havens to receive the profits from our water companies. Lastly, every English water customer should see their bills reduced after 30 years of being used as cash cows by the owners of water companies. It is time that consumers and their pockets were treated better.

In October last year, the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs suggested that an independent review to determine whether the water industry was fit for purpose was required. The Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management went further, suggesting that such a review needed to examine the ownership of water companies. The Select Committee also raised concerns about the powers available to Ministers and Ofwat to improve governance and prevent pollution. With climate change approaching and a creaking infrastructure, the Committee argued that the need for change was urgent.

For some of the reasons that I have set out, there is growing concern about the ownership model in the water industry, and there are alternatives to the current privatised system. Long-term alternatives that the Government should consider include, in particular, a mutual approach, with democratic public ownership by consumers and employees, modelled on the success of Welsh Water and inspired by other similar success stories. Welsh Water, or Glas Cymru, does not pay dividends to shareholders, and yet it operates in the private sector. It
has an ownership model that forces it always to operate in the interest of its customers and it has changed the way in which it raises finance, in order to reduce the cost of credit.

Welsh Water now has the strongest credit ratings in the water industry, which reduces its financing costs and allows for even more future investment in its infrastructure and services. Customer bills have been reduced steadily in real terms and so far it has returned about £180 million to customers in the form of customer dividends. In addition, it has provided some £10 million of support for vulnerable and low-income customers, through social tariffs and an assistance fund.

The first step on that path for the water industry in England, so that it can match and then go further than Welsh Water, would be the formation of consumer and employee trusts. These trusts would have the power to appoint non-executive directors to water company boards, and they would have access to independent advice from management, so that they can make well-informed and independent decisions.

Ofwat should discourage investment in the water industry that requires a fast return to the owners of expensive equity. Instead, it should steer water companies towards the lower-cost debt market, with responsible investors such as public sector pension funds, whose interests are aligned with those of the water sector and whose investment could help to ensure that there is a modern, resilient water infrastructure.

Over the longer term, as equity investors seek to sell up because they recognise that they can no longer make a fast buck, consumer and employee trusts could use bond issues to buy those equity investors’ stakes in the business. These trusts would need to be underwritten by a buffer, or internal equity reserves, to borrow against. That could be achieved through a Government guarantee on loans or debt, to ensure that any large unexpected investment needs will be met, and to ensure that if anything should go awry, lenders are in a first loss position. Similar initiatives already take place in other areas of Government policy. Government guarantees could be replaced over time through the accumulation of non-distributed reserves, or of retained profit, by the trusts.

As the ownership of water companies changes, legislation should be passed to embed the not-for-profit principle. The new not-for-profit water companies would also require protection, with an asset lock to prevent demutualisation in the future. Consumer and employee trusts—like those at Nationwide, John Lewis and other mutuals—would enable customers and the workforce to have an active role in the key decisions taken by their organisations. The board would include employee and customer directors, and the trust membership would enable members—including consumers—to vote for board members, and to agree audit, remuneration and company governance decisions, as well as how profits are invested or distributed.

Ofwat should be given new powers to ensure that water companies encourage employee and customer participation in the democratic process. The new employee and consumer trusts should also have a role in the scrutiny and decision making of Ofwat, with a scrutiny panel that reviews the operations of the regulator, led by consumers, and also playing a role in Ofwat’s appointments to its board.

In conclusion, comparisons of public ownership and private ownership of the water industry do not come out favourably for England’s privatised water companies. They do not look like they are committed to environmental investment and the other challenges facing the water industry. The latest price review should herald the beginning of the transformation to new not-for-profit owners—the very consumers and employees who depend on the services of the water industry. Public ownership works in Scotland and the model for mutual transformation of the rest of the water industry works in Wales. It is time that there was new ownership of the water companies in England, and I commend the mutual model to the House.

9.48 am

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): If hon. Members check my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, they will see that I chair an organisation called the UK Water Partnership. As the Leader of the Opposition claimed that I was some sort of stooge for the water companies, I put on the record that the UK Water Partnership is a public-private partnership, and that I was asked to chair it by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. It brings together industry, policy makers and the research community to try to provide the key to unlocking a $500 billion global marketplace, as well as tackling water security issues through a strategic approach to research innovation and global clients. It effectively works right across the water sector, helping British companies to do better in a global marketplace. I very much do not speak for water companies.

As the water Minister who introduced more competition, changed Ofwat’s prioritisation of environmental protection, introduced the catchment approach to upstream water management and oversaw the Thames Tideway tunnel in its initial phase, I have a fair degree of insight into how private water companies work and what they deliver for customers.

I appreciate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) bringing this matter to the House. I suppose it all depends on which end of the telescope we look down. It is easy to pray in aid companies and organisations that fail, and so give a malign picture of the whole operation of our water sector. I will try to give a more balanced view, but I totally accept some of the points made, as there are good players and bad players in every sector.

As in any field that involves a number of organisations, we will of course come across ones that are good and others that are bad, but I am absolutely certain that we have benefited from privatisation. It is wrong to turn the clock back and pretend that there was some halcyon era of cheap water, exemplary customer service, massive investment and great environmental activity by companies in the days when they were publicly owned. To those who say, “Ah, but we would do it better this time,” I say that that is the Venezuela defence. Socialists say that Venezuela has not done socialism right and that they would do it differently here, that nationalisation would be different from in the past. Those years of bad service, under-investment and environmental degradation must not happen again.

Gareth Thomas: I am enjoying the trip to Venezuela that the right hon. Gentleman is taking us on. May I draw him back to my remarks about the mutual model
of democratic public ownership, which would see the water companies remaining in the private sector, albeit run by their customers and employees, a bit like at John Lewis and Nationwide?

Richard Benyon: I can come on to talk about suggestions that I think have some virtue, particularly employee share ownership schemes. As with everything, there is no perfect right or absolute wrong; there is a massive area of grey, and I will explore some of the nuances, on which I think we can perhaps find some agreement.

On the model of nationalisation I have heard certain individuals speak about at Momentum rallies, I think about the head of a nationalised utility company going to see the Chancellor to plead for more infrastructure investment funds, only to be told, “Get in the queue behind the NHS, welfare, policing and schools”—the long list of public spending priorities that come before something that is now funded privately and by institutional investors. Let us consider some facts. Since privatisation, water companies in England and Wales have spent about £150 billion on improvements to the water service. That is infrastructure that had been absolutely ignored by public expenditure before it was put into the private sector. The companies now spend about £8 billion a year continuing with those improvements.

When I was water Minister, I met institutional investors and saw that the regulated utility sector is an extremely popular place for people to invest, including for pension funds—the people who pay the pensions of people in the public sector. I welcome the fact that sovereign funds—the people who pay the pensions of people in the public sector. I welcome the fact that sovereign funds—the people who pay the pensions of people in the public sector. I welcome the fact that sovereign funds—the people who pay the pensions of people in the public sector. I welcome the fact that sovereign funds—the people who pay the pensions of people in the public sector. I welcome the fact that sovereign funds—the people who pay the pensions of people in the public sector. I welcome the fact that sovereign funds—the people who pay the pensions of people in the public sector. I welcome the fact that sovereign funds—the people who pay the pensions of people in the public sector. I welcome the fact that sovereign funds—the people who pay the pensions of people in the public sector. I welcome the fact that sovereign funds—the people who pay the pensions of people in the public sector.

Rebecca Pow: Does my right hon. Friend agree that water companies are already getting involved in good environmental projects, to clean the water, work with landowners and make it so that the water needs less treatment? With that interest in sustainability and many more people wanting to engage in green investment, does he foresee the opportunities expanding, particularly as under the Agriculture Bill we will be paying for public services, the public good and the need to protect our land more?

Richard Benyon: As water Minister, I pushed the concept of payment for ecosystem services, which was against Ofwat’s institutional view at the time, though I am happy to say that it has moved on. It liked the idea of a regulated asset—of measuring the quality of the water coming in at one end and going out at the other, and judging whether the asset was working. I would say, “Try to let a thousand flowers bloom.” Some of them would fail, but building that relationship between a water company and land managers upstream, and paying them to help to produce better quality water, is the sort of thing I am glad to say is now becoming the welcome norm across the sector.

Rebecca Pow: I meant to mention an excellent project I have visited. Upstream Thinking, run by South West Water, is a phenomenal example of exactly how that is working.

Richard Benyon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention that project, which was initially developed around Dartmoor. It is an extraordinary scheme that is really working, and that I hope will become even more mainstream in the near future.

Daniel Zeichner: The right hon. Gentleman’s points are similar to those brought to my attention by Anglian Water, which services my region. I do not think that anyone disputes that good work is being done, but the unhappiness is with some of the extraordinarily labyrinthine financial arrangements that sit behind the companies. Does he agree that if that could be resolved, in many of the ways my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) suggested, it would solve some of the dilemmas? No one is challenging the good work that is being done.

Richard Benyon: There has absolutely been bad practice. I have had my concerns about Thames Water in the past, but today the company has capped its dividend payments, is investing more in resilience and is doing a whole new range of different activities, and my concern is that we risk cutting off an enormous amount of infrastructure investment if we do not get this right. I think there is a way forward, and I will touch on it in a moment.

Compared with 30 years ago, customers are now five times less likely to suffer from supply interruptions, eight times less likely to suffer from sewer flooding and 100 times less likely to have low water pressure. The hon. Member for Harrow West talked about Welsh Water; he is right that people sometimes suggest that it is a mutualised organisation, when it is a private company. Welsh Water loses 121 litres per property in leakage, which is more than nearly every other water company. Its average combined water and sewage bill is £439, which is 8% higher than the average English and Welsh bill, at £405. It is higher than the bill in six English companies, and that is in a country where there is no shortage of water. I come from the Thames Water region and we are short of water there, but in Wales they are not so I cannot understand why the bills are so high. In Welsh Water, the average number of minutes lost due to supply interruptions is 43 minutes, which is about 400% higher than in most other companies, where fewer than 10 minutes are lost.

The picture is not universally wonderful, and there occasionally needs to be a bit of balance in the subject. Water companies have reduced leakage by a third since the 1990s. We are about to see an incredible increase in innovative methods of detecting leakage, and it is right that in the current price review round there is an enormous driver on those companies to crack down on it further.

On the environment, standards have dramatically risen, with the welcome return of wildlife to rivers that had been biologically dead since the industrial revolution. Ours remain healthy rivers and were thought to be on the verge of being wiped out 30 years ago, yet they are now seen in every county in England.

The average domestic water bill is just over £1 a day—that is £1 a day to get all the water we need into the household, and all the sewage and waste water out. Although bills went up immediately after privatisation to help deal with decades of under-investment when the industry was owned and run by the Government, bills
have stayed pretty much the same in real terms since 1994 after inflation, and are set to fall in real terms over the next few years. By 2025, bills will have fallen in real terms for a decade. The industry’s independent regulator, Ofwat—which has just come in for some stick—has calculated that bills are £120 lower than they would have been if the combination of privatisation and tough independent regulation had not happened. Bills would have been £120 more per household if the industry had remained in public ownership.

On the subject of customer satisfaction, the hon. Member for Harrow West has said that people are terribly dissatisfied with their water companies. I went on the internet last night to look at what Ofwat, the Consumer Council for Water and individual water companies are saying, and customer satisfaction levels for water and sewerage services are around 90%. As politicians, would we not love to have a bit of that, particularly at the moment?

**Gareth Thomas:** I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman would comment on two things. The first is the National Audit Office’s calculations, which suggest that there has been a 43% increase in real terms in water bills since privatisation, and the second is the significant difference in water prices between publicly owned Scottish Water and the privatised water companies in England, which I mentioned.

**Richard Benyon:** I do not know the circumstances in Scotland, so I can only speculate, but that is another country that is not short of water, as many parts of this country are. I just think that we need to look at what the customers are saying, and my impression is that customers are not shrinking violets. When I came into this House in 2005, my inbox was overflowing with complaints about Thames Water’s customer service, which made me realise that water is an absolute necessity of life. It is the first thing that people will complain about; it is something that we perhaps rely on too much, and use too much of, in the area of the country in which I live. However, the idea that customers are somehow not involved in and concerned with raising these issues is wrong. When they are asked about them, they give quite interesting responses.

**Rebecca Pow:** Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**Richard Benyon:** Let me just finish this point. A recent ComRes survey shows that 86% of customers trust their water company overall, with 89% trusting it to provide good-quality water and 87% trusting it to provide a reliable service. Those are levels of satisfaction that we as a political class can only dream of.

Will my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) be very quick? I know that other Members want to speak.

**Rebecca Pow:** Does my right hon. Friend think that there is still a role for customers in reducing their water consumption? Water is a precious resource, and we are probably using more than we ought to.

**Richard Benyon:** Yes, we need to do more. When compared with other European countries, we are absolute laggards: we use much too much water, wash our cars with potable, drinking-quality water, and do all kinds of things that we should not. We have to change our lives, and I hope the Minister will be able to inform us about what will be happening in that area in the future.

On the topic of dividends, which is a key point, Ofwat says that each company’s licence requires it to declare or pay dividends “only in accordance with a dividend policy which has been approved by its Board and which complies with both of the following principles.”

The dividends declared or paid will not impair the ability of the company to finance the regulated water and sewerage business.

Under a system of incentive regulation, dividends reward efficiency and the management of economic risk.”

In the past, some companies have certainly played a bit fast and loose with those principles, and have developed levels of gearing that I, as a manager of a small business when I entered DEFRA, found quite eye-watering. However, the hon. Member for Harrow West does tend to pick on the bad players, and in talking about Thames Water, he was perhaps not talking about the Thames Water of today. He might have been talking about a model that applied under previous ownership, and I urge him to look more closely at what Thames Water is trying to achieve today.

We should encourage companies to look at employee share ownership schemes. That whole concept of finding ways to democratisé capital is a huge, rich seam that we could collectively work on. Water companies are good places to encourage not just employees, but customers, to develop a higher interest in the ownership of that company, which is a better way to get more people involved without damaging any investment potential. I worry about Labour’s proposals for nationalisation right across the sector. It recently published its plans in a publication called “Clear Water”, but stopped short of explaining how the big challenges faced by the water industry, such as climate change and an increasing population, would be addressed by its substantial re-organisation of structures and ownerships. That publication makes no attempt to acknowledge the many improvements made since privatisation in 1989, let alone the further benefits such as falling bills, improved services and increased investment that companies have set out for the future.

If water is nationalised, it could seriously damage the service and quality of water in England. It could create a future in which decisions are driven primarily by short-term political expediency rather than the needs of customers, and in which the high levels of investment needed to improve services are not sustained. The result would be bad for customers, bad for the environment, and bad for the economy.

10.6 am

**John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab):** It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who has displayed his knowledge of not just the water industry but Momentum rallies, Venezuela and so on. His remarks put our party and our Front Benchers on notice that we have to get the detail of this policy right. It is a very radical policy, and let us hope that changes in the water industry, but we will hear many mentions of Venezuela and Momentum rallies in any election campaign in which this is an issue. It is also a
great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), who opened the debate in a typically urbane and knowledgeable way. He is a great loss to our Front Bench, and I hope that one day he will be a Minister again in a future Labour Government.

Gareth Thomas: A £5 note is on its way.

John Grogan: I do not know whether that is a “thank you” or a bet.

I will speak briefly, but perhaps a little explicitly. I think that part of my hon. Friend’s speech was directed at our party’s own Front Benchers. At the moment, we are consulting on our plans for the water industry, and I hope nothing is set in stone. In developing our policy, we need to learn as much from Scotland, Wales and—if I may say so—Northern Ireland as we do from experts who reside in the north of London. My hon. Friend referred to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the shadow Chancellor competing, about a year ago. It was last spring—spring was in the air—and one of those gentlemen said:

“Far too often, there is evidence that water companies—your water companies—have not been acting sufficiently in the public interest.”

It could have been either of them; in this instance, it was the Secretary of State. On that occasion, he was as cruel and as vehement in his speech about the water industry as he was about the Opposition last week, so this is an open goal for the Opposition.

I will not repeat the statistics that my hon. Friend referred to when opening the debate, except for the basic statistic that the privatised water industry has taken out about as much in dividends as it has put in as investment, so the idea that the privatised water industry has brought new investment into the industry that would not have been made otherwise is wrong. However, what should be a Labour Opposition’s policy on changing ownership? I hope that the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), can confirm that the submissions that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West has made will be considered very carefully in our current review of policy in this area.

I share with the right hon. Member for Newbury a love of employee share ownership schemes, particularly if they involve the whole of the company. I chaired such a scheme, which ran Hatfield, one of the last two deep mines in our industry. It has a different feel from any other form of capitalism. I hope we will consider that. I hope we will also consider the role of regulation, because the decisions on the regulation of the water industry. It is a specialist role.

In Scotland, there is a publicly owned industry, but there is also an independent regulator. Incidentally, there is also competition in the business retail market in Scotland, which exists alongside public ownership of the industry. We have had some debate already about the precise form of ownership, but as I understand it, in Wales it is not employee-owned, but a not-for-profit model. I understand that the cost of debt for the Welsh industry is less than for any other industry in the public or private sector in the whole United Kingdom. I hope we will learn from Wales, too.

If we are to take some of the water industry at least into the nationalised sector, why not let a thousand flowers bloom? I hope our Front Benchers will consider that. Why not have some on the model that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West mentioned and some where there is demand in the public sector? That would be one way of doing it, but it will be much more costly to have all the water industry in the nationalised sector, as compared with my hon. Friend’s suggestion. We have to face up to the question of compensation. It is not good enough for an academic in north London to refer to how the banks were taken in distress into the public sector. Certainly they were, but they had virtually no value in their assets, and that would not be the case with the water industry.

Some of the water industry shares are owned by the workers of the water industry, and some are owned by the pensioners. I have had an interesting dialogue with an organisation called We Own It, which is contributing to the field. When I asked it about this question, it said—I paraphrase—that it did not really believe in compensation, but that it recognised that workers and pensioners somehow have to be looked after. We have to do better than that if we are to stand up with a general election campaign.

Richard Benyon: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Polls are often cited to say that an enormous percentage of people want to take the companies back into national ownership. Of course, it depends on which way the question is asked. When it is phrased, “In order to do that, the Government would have to spend £90 billion of taxpayers’ money. Do you not think that could be better spent on other areas of the public sector?”, they nearly always agree. It depends on the question.

John Grogan: It does, but obviously if a Labour Government went down that road, they would then have assets on the public sector books to match that spend, as the right hon. Gentleman is well aware. The arguments are not black and white, as he admitted in his speech. We do have to think out the policy very carefully. I am a great believer in radical policies. I voted from the Back Benches in favour of some of them under the last Labour Government when those were perhaps not the flavour of the month. We have to get it right.

I will mention one other issue and then finish. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, did a report on the water industry. I commend some of the detail of that, and one detail in particular. The overflows from combined sewers owned by the water industry are a national disgrace. We have cleaned up our beaches in the past two or three decades, largely, dare I say it, because of European regulation.

We now need to clean up our rivers. Ilkley in my constituency is a great tourist destination, with swimmers in the Wharfe all the time. It connects downstream with the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) at Otley. We should not have sewage being discharged on a very regular basis. While I understand that various other things are going
on in Parliament next Tuesday, I will be concentrating on the afternoon drop-in session of the chief executive of Ofwat and the Environment Agency. I hope they will address the issue of sewage and commit to cleaning up our rivers, just as we have cleaned up our beaches.

10.14 am

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on securing this important debate and on making the important distinction between co-operatives and mutualisation, and industries nationalised via the state. That distinction is often missed in these debates.

I will talk about the future of the water industry from the perspective of the fourth industrial revolution and the digitisation of our networks. On that basis, I declare my interests in relation to the various works I do in the technology sector, as set out in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Last Friday, I met with the team at Bristol Water, which supplies drinking water to more than a million customers, including all of my constituents in Bristol North West. I had expected the meeting to be run of the mill, but I was somewhat surprised, because Bristol Water turned out to be far more advanced in its digitisation of the water network than many other water utility companies.

Many Members will know that British industry is lagging behind in the digitisation of our businesses, which is a priority if we are to unlock the productivity challenge in the British economy and help meet our climate change objectives. At Bristol Water, sensors have been installed across the entire network and big data analytics have been deployed. Those are new words for many sections of the water industry. In Bristol, we get our water from lakes and reservoirs around the Mendip hills and from the River Severn via the Gloucester and Sharpness canal. Water from the River Severn needs to be pumped into Bristol, which requires large amounts of energy. Water from the Mendips requires less energy due to gravity. Bringing together data on real-time energy prices with real-time water consumption requirements has allowed Bristol Water to build algorithms that decide when to pump water from where to where and at what time, helping to reduce over-pumping and generating significant savings on its electricity bill.

Those efficiency savings will allow Bristol Water, subject to Ofwat’s agreement, to pass on price reductions to Bristol Water customers, which I know many of my constituents will welcome. As we have heard from my hon. Friend, that is an unusual thing from a utility company in the past few years. I am sure Bristol Water itself would say that it is a new positive turn, as it was in something of a bother with Ofwat a few years ago for not being able to agree price rises. I welcome that positive U-turn from Bristol Water for my constituents.

In a very Bristol way, Bristol Water brought in sensors, big data analytics and algorithms through collaboration. It set up a start-up incubator in Bristol where, for example, a big data entrepreneur, Hackett Consulting, has been able to go from being a Bristol start-up to a scale-up business from the things it has learned at Bristol Water. It is now able to sell that as a service to other industries across the country.

Beyond the algorithms, sensors have been installed across the network, meaning that leakages can be dealt with more efficiently and accurately. Instead of waiting for someone to call up and say, “There has been a leak of water at the end of the street”, field engineers’ iPads bleep at them when there are leaks, and they know exactly where to go to try to fix them. That reduces the number of customers affected by the closing off of pipes and decreases the time it takes to fix the leak.

Reduced energy consumption and better management of leaks, alongside helping customers to reduce their water consumption, all make extremely valuable contributions to our climate change objectives. As a member of the Science and Technology Committee, I have been troubled to hear from Lord Deben, the chairman of the Climate Change Committee, about how far we are falling behind as a country in meeting our climate change objectives.

The Government must take the easy wins to ensure we get back on track to decarbonising our economy. Bristol Water’s approach seems to be an important and useful way to do that. I was therefore thrilled to hear about the work being undertaken in my constituency. I encourage the Government, Ofwat and other water companies to look at how we have digitised the network to improve efficiency and to contribute to decarbonising the economy in Bristol. I hope the Minister will tell the House how she is helping regulators and water companies to move in that important direction.

10.18 am

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Gray. First, I thank my hon. Friend from my namesake constituency, the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). He gave a great technical speech and we all learned a lot about how we can improve the data analytics and dynamics of the water industry.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan), who made a number of important points on which I will elaborate. Most informatively, he said that we should not rely on expert academics and opinions from north London. Perhaps in this debate we will hear some expert advice from west Yorkshire that the Labour Front-Bench spokesman and the Minister can act on. Lastly, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) for securing this debate. He chairs the Co-operative Party with some panache. We have been waiting for this debate for some time, and I declare an interest as a Co-operative Member of Parliament.

I want to commend the publicly-owned Scottish Water, which, over the past 16 years, has managed to save consumers an average £42 a year when compared with English consumers, and is ranked as one of the UK’s most trusted companies. I also want to highlight the success of Welsh Water, as many others have. Glas Cymru, established under the then Labour Government, has managed to return £180 million to customers in the form of customer dividends, while providing £10 million to assist low-income families and individuals by offering them lower tariffs.

An increasing body of support shows that the Tories’ ideological obsession with privatisation, which the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) is a great exponent of, has done nothing to improve services and
has only raised the cost to consumers. Water is water, whether you are English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish. But under the English privatised system it is more costly, even though both Scotland and Wales have very difficult topography and are sparsely populated in large areas.

When English people turn on their taps, they pour money down the drain—except that it is not down the drain, but into the pockets of the wealthy and into the wealth funds of foreign investors in countries such as Canada, Australia and Singapore. That makes up the £6.5 billion of dividends paid out to shareholders in the past five years: the same amount of money that goes into the pockets of the people of Wales. Do we really think that is good enough? Do we really agree that in our Union there should be a two-tier system for our most fundamental services? And do we think that an individual or family should pay more for water because they live in one part of the Union and not another?

The ideological mindset of those obsessed with the privatisation agenda is such that this Government cannot see the evidence in front of their eyes. Privatisation does not necessarily, as promised—

Richard Benyon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Sobel: I give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who I am sure will defend privatisation.

Richard Benyon: I am very fond of the hon. Gentleman. He and I agree on other things, but I cannot resist responding to being attacked for being ideological when I feel I am combating an ideology here. We have a system that works and it is being attacked by ideology.

On another point, of course 380 or 400 quid a year is a lot of money to people on low incomes and we have systems to support them, but for people on average incomes, compared with other costs in their lives, getting water that is 99% drinkable and of good quality and getting sewage away for about £1 a day is quite a good deal for most people, particularly if we protect the poor.

Alex Sobel: I was not completely embodying all the faults in the right hon. Gentleman’s arguments. To repeat his point, it is good value, but why is it better value in Scotland and Wales than it is in England? We should surely aim for best value.

At this crucial time, when living standards across the UK are being decimated and individuals and families are struggling to stay afloat, we need to reassert both sense and our fundamental obligation to the people we represent. We need to assert that the market has limits, that not everything in this world should be up for grabs, and that privatisation does not necessarily equal value for money. The market has its place as a means of exchange for goods and services, but a basic selling principle of marketisation is the offer of genuine choice, lower costs and better services. I am a customer of Yorkshire Water. The only way I can get Harrogate water is to buy it in a bottle. I cannot get it through the tap and cannot change provider as I can in other utility markets. None of those things apply to the case of England’s regional water companies, so I suggest it is time to look at the example of our Welsh and Scottish compatriots and to change our—literally—leaking system.

With no competition and no realistic prospect of withdrawing consumption, water bills can be best conceptualised as a tax, because everybody needs to have water through the tap. Indeed, other systems, such as that in Scotland, account for water within council tax. It is not a matter of theory, but of practice in Scotland. Under our system, however, there is no differentiation between households. Our flat, regressive tax hits those on low and medium incomes hardest, particularly those on medium incomes who have no redress. Shareholders skim a dividend from UK taxpayers who have no choice but to purchase water from monopolistic regional providers.

We have only to look to Welsh Water, which operates on a not-for-profit basis within the private system, to see how well a mutual approach can work. The company serves 3 million people every day and has the strongest credit rating in the industry, as we have heard from my hon. Friends, as well as sector-leading levels of customer satisfaction. Its success does not benefit a few wealthy shareholders. As I have said, £180 million has been returned to customers.

The idea that a select few own and profit from something that falls literally from the sky—something that makes up 70% of our bodies—is absurd. The arguments for privatisation of our most basic assets and infrastructure have been lost. It is not about competition, which implies choice. No, it is the same faith in the market that means people in this country pay through the nose for their gas, electricity and train travel, often receiving a worse service where it is privatised than where it is in the public sector.

Last summer, as my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley mentioned, Yorkshire Water allowed sewage to flow through the River Wharfe, which starts in his constituency and flows right through mine in Otley and Pool. As was said, swimmers in the River Wharfe had to swim through the sewage. Private companies do not face the level of accountability that the system demands.

For mutualisation to happen, the water companies must first be taken into state ownership and the shareholders compensated, and then the companies can be put into the hands of consumers. Our basic infrastructure can be truly owned by the public without the need for direct state ownership, which MPs of all parties should support. Then we come to the question of governance. Wales has a company limited by guarantee. It has no shareholders, so its corporate governance functions are the responsibility of its board, which has a majority of independent non-executive directors, and its members, around 70 individuals, are appointed following a process undertaken by an independent membership selection panel. Those 70 people are the customers: the people of Wales.

There are alternative forms of governance, with a water company in a defined geography, as we have in England, being a good fit for a consumers’ co-operative model. Consumers’ co-operatives utilise the co-operative principle of democratic member control—or, as we call it in the Labour party, one member, one vote. Most consumers’ co-operatives have a board of directors elected directly by and from the membership. Unfortunately, water in England drips with right-wing ideology, draining the public purse and rinsing out our most valuable resources, while drowning customers in debt. That money-making monopoly and the two-tier UK system must
end. We must instead look west to Wales and replicate a model that brings water—the most basic of human needs—back into the hands of the public.

10.27 am

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I do not have long, so I cannot dwell too much on some of the valuable contributions made by hon. Members, but I commend the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) for securing this debate. He raised very important points, and I am delighted that they are being addressed in this forum. There was quite a contrast between some of his comments and those of the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who painted a glowing picture of water privatisation that I find it difficult to recognise.

The right hon. Member for Newbury admitted that he knew little of what was happening in Scotland, which is a surprising admission for a former water Minister, who should surely be prepared to learn best practice from wherever it can be found. After all, we are only up the road, geographically speaking. I hope he will be interested to hear some details in my speech. He also spoke of water being a necessity of life, and I wholeheartedly agree. It is far too important to be subject to a privatised system that gives, as we have heard, a worse service, and that seems to be largely driven by right-wing ideology, rather than what is best for customers.

There has been a lot of enthusiastic talk in this place about taking back control. That sounds strange coming from people who are, by and large, wholehearted supporters of stripping democratically elected Governments of control over the delivery of public resources, instead preferring essential services to be fractured and put into the hands of the private sector. Taking back control of England’s water supplies is an argument that makes a lot of sense to me. People are rightly scunnered by a system that services debt and pays disproportionate dividends through increasing bills for customers. There should be an outcry over the findings of the recent Greenwich University research, which suggested that a lot of sense to me. People are rightly scunnered by a system that services debt and pays disproportionate dividends through increasing bills for customers. There should be an outcry over the findings of the recent Greenwich University research, which suggested that a staggeringly huge amount of money is lost to the private sector through leaky pipes. We must instead look west to Wales and replicate a model that brings water—the most basic of human needs—back into the hands of the public.

**Richard Benyon**: One thing I know about Scottish Water is that its leakage level is way above that of the rest of the United Kingdom—I think just shy of 40% of water is lost, compared with about a fifth in England. I wonder whether the hon. Lady would like to comment on that.

**Deidre Brock**: It is interesting. We are, of course, spending considerable amounts of money on addressing that. As I understand it, and I will speak about this later, our service performance is now comparable to the leading UK water companies; on some measures, we outperform them. As we continue to invest, water loss will be driven down. English water companies are having to resort to debt; that is what their investment in infrastructure is largely based on.

**Gareth Thomas**: Far be it from me to help the Scottish National party out, but as I understand it, from analysis done by Greenwich University, the levels of leakage per kilometre in Scotland are better than for many English water companies, and are certainly in line with the average at worst.

**Deidre Brock**: I was quite surprised by the contribution made by the right hon. Member for Newbury, as that is not my understanding. Perhaps I should quote the Scottish Water Commission, which noted in 2013:

“It is now more than a decade since Scottish Water was established. In that time the company has transformed itself as an organisation. It has caught up with the top performing companies in England and Wales on cost efficiency and levels of service and has regularly reached—and outperformed—its targets.”

I expect more of that in the future.

As Greenwich University research found, “the public-owned sector in Scotland delivers the service just as efficiently, albeit at a lower cost to consumers.”

In Scotland, bills are 2% lower in real terms than they were 18 years ago, while over the equivalent period in England they increased by 13%. Drinking water continues to be at record levels of compliance, and there were no failing waste water treatment works in 2017, compared with more than 70 in 2002.

Scottish Water has reduced energy consumption and increased renewable power generation. It has cut carbon emissions by more than 30% since it first reported in 2006-07. Driven by the Scottish Government’s ambitious renewable heat and carbon reduction targets, the amount of renewable energy the company generates is now more than double its electricity consumption. Ageing facilities are being replaced through major investment in projects such as Glencorse water treatment works outside Edinburgh. That energy-efficient plant was delivered on schedule and under budget, and now supplies cleaner, safer water to around half a million people in the capital, while having sustainability at the core of its operations. A hydro-turbine provides almost half the facility’s own energy needs, helping to keep water charges low for customers.

Scottish Water’s service performance, as I mentioned, is now comparable with that of the leading UK water companies; on some measures, it outperforms them,
while still keeping the bills down. Even where it can be said that the leading English companies perform better, at the current pace of investment by Scottish Water, and without the spend on dividends, that position is set to change over the next decade.

The myth that private profiteers are required to deliver things better has been dispelled. Indeed, the We Own It campaign points to the move towards public ownership internationally, with 235 cities in 37 countries taking water into public ownership in the last 15 years. Public ownership of public water supplies is already working in Scotland. That may seem clear, but it is worth reminding the Labour party of that fact, given that the Scottish leader, Richard Leonard, argued recently that they should be taken back into public hands. There was a wee bit of confusion there, but I will certainly draw his attention to helpful comments made by his colleagues down here today.

Scotland is rightly famous for its water. It is a reliable natural asset that serves our health, our wellbeing, our environment and our economy well. It is right that public supplies of domestic water have remained a public asset, delivered in the public interest. It should be so in England too.

10.35 am

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). As a Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament, I listened intently to what he had to say with great interest and much nodding. He has been a real champion of the Co-operative movement over many years. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and I, as young Co-operative MPs in this place, have a lot to learn about the championing of the Co-operative cause from the Obi-Wan Kenobi of the Co-op party—my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West.

This debate has long been due. As someone who has worked for a water company, I believe we do not talk enough about water policy in this place; we need to talk more about it if we are to meet our Paris climate change commitments to create a fundamentally sustainable water industry, in terms of water usage, the chemicals used in it, and the contribution to the natural world.

Clearly, some serious and genuine concerns are being raised by members of the public and Opposition Members about the way that our privatised water system is run. The privatisation of water has not worked to deliver the benefits that it should have in 2019. Too much money is being paid out in dividends and not enough investment is being made in fixing leaks and reducing water usage. Not enough is being spent on climate change mitigation or fundamentally fixing the broken system. We need better water resilience and better value for money for our customers.

The water companies are only part of that. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) was right when he talked about the need to look at regulation as well. I am certain that he and the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) will read carefully the water policies that I hope to publish, as Labour’s shadow water Minister, in the next couple of months. They will describe how we should deal with the fact that we need a better, reformed system, and additional policy levers to address climate change.

**Richard Benyon:** Can the hon. Gentleman give us a taster of those policies by saying whether he will compensate shareholders for the £90 billion that they own, and where he will find the money?

**Luke Pollard:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that. As his intervention came only on page 1 of my 12-page speech, perhaps he is pre-empting some of it. I suggest that he looks at the proposals that the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and the shadow Business Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), have published that talk about replacing the share capital ownership with bonds. There are already details of that available.

It is important to consider the debate in context, because large parts of the UK, as well as the rest of the world, are experiencing a water crisis. We like to think of England as a notoriously damp place where water is plentiful, but that is not the case for large parts of the country. We need to recognise that England is in fact in the lower quartile globally of available water resource per capita. More people are living in areas of water stress, and more population growth and house building is planned in areas of water stress—especially in the east of England, London and the south-east of England; we will need to not only reduce water use but transfer more water there. That suggests that we need a different system to handle some of those challenges.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley hinted, droughts cause hundreds of millions of pounds of damage, and have led to hundreds of thousands of fish dying from over-abstraction and to serious decline in our wetland species. Sewage has also been pumped into our rivers. It is worth saying that thankfully that is less common than it was. Indeed, when I was a boy growing up in the west country, at one of our glorious beaches, swimming past floating turds was commonplace. It is not anymore, thanks to the investment that has been made, but more needs to be done on that with regard to our rivers. [Interruption.] The right hon. Member for Newbury throws his hands in the air, but bill payers in the far south-west know about that investment, because we paid for it with what for many years were the highest bills in the entire country—not just a wee bit higher, but double the nearest amount. We have paid for what has gone out in dividends, as well as for what has gone into the system.

We need better water resilience, because there is simply more demand. The latest statistics show that there will be 4.1 million more people in the south-east by 2045, and by 2080 there could be an extra 10 million. We need to think about how to deal with the amount of water used, where it comes from and how it is treated, to ensure that we minimise the effect on our climate. We are also facing increased flooding. That context is really important; it is why we need more debates about the structure and operation of our water industry, and why today’s debate is so important.

I have to say that we have seen moves in the right direction under this Government, but they frequently come from DEFRA press office announcements rather...
than from policies being fully implemented. I do not think that Ministers are crankling the handle sufficiently to achieve the change that could be delivered to our water industry if we showed greater concern about pricing and about investment in climate change, flood and drought mitigation. We know that more can be done, because in the latest round of price reviews and business plans, companies have published proposals that hint at a slow move in the right direction. One such proposal, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West will have seen, is in the south-west: South West Water has proposed an element of mutual shareholding as part of its wider ownership base. If it can be done in the west country, it can be done elsewhere, so that could be encouraged as part of the wider debate.

Labour’s water proposals are pretty clear—and pretty popular, as it happens. Some companies have engaged in good practice, but not enough; as the right hon. Member for Newbury says, there are bad players and bad behaviour in our industry. Thames Water is the poster child for such bad behaviour, but sadly it is not the only one. We need better regulation and better ownership, so Labour has set out plans to take our water companies back into public ownership.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington and my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles for putting together Labour’s clear water proposals, which set out our plan for public ownership of water companies. As our September 2018 booklet “The Green Transformation” states, “Labour will…bring water back into democratic public ownership, lowering bills and providing levels of investment needed to drastically reduce leakage and tackle major sewage pollution incidents, which are still rising.”

I absolutely agree with the right hon. Member for Newbury that we need to guarantee the investment stream. There is a role for investment in our water companies, but our proposal is that the role of private ownership should come to an end.

Our “Clear Water” plan states: “To ensure maximum openness, transparency and scrutiny, RWA boards will have a statutory duty to make information widely available and hold monthly public meetings in different locations each month. Meetings will also be broadcast live on the internet and all papers will be made public.”

Many good lessons can be learned from the operation of mutuals about how customers and employees can be brought into running better businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West said it well: we need better value from our water industry. We also need to look at regulatory responsibility. Our plan further states: “Regulatory responsibility…will be absorbed into Defra, which will form a new public regulatory system in the form of a National Water Agency responsible for economic and performance standards and capacity-building.”

As we get closer to publishing further details, more information will become available.

Labour is suggesting that our new water system needs to consider sustainability and the public interest, not just private profit. The shadow DEFRA team is exploring what other water policies should accompany our proposal, so that we can tackle climate change, flooding, water scarcity, water usage, water pollution from plastics and microplastics, lead pipes—an issue of particular interest in some parts of England—and water affordability.

When the next election comes—many suspect that that will be very soon—our manifesto will offer a full suite of policies not only on public ownership, but on a better system.

I am aware that the Minister needs to sum up soon. This has been a good debate, and I hope there will be many more to come as we make our case. The hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who is no longer in her place, spoke very well about the need to address personal water consumption—one of the reasons I carry around my own water bottle, rather than using the House of Commons’s supply of bottled water. Indeed, it seems ironic that in a debate about the water industry, we are still using bottled water in this place, so perhaps the House authorities could look at that. We can all do things to address the challenge in our water industry. Ownership, management and our own consumption are all part of the mix.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on securing this debate through the Backbench Business Committee, and I thank Mr Deputy Speaker for selecting it.

The hon. Gentleman and many others raised a huge number of points, which I intend to address. However, I think I will have to edit my reply to add a few facts about dividend payments, leakage and other matters, because there seems to be a complete lack of understanding and an attempt to use averages everywhere. I appreciate that that may be beneficial at times, but we need to get into the granularity of these points as well.

Water is key to life, which is why it features so prominently in our 25-year environment plan. The long-term view for the industry is clear, including on matters of supply, leakage, demand, consumption, environment and the necessary investment in infrastructure. Those matters are well set out, and companies have to consider the 25-year environment plan when producing their own future plans.

The Government support a private water sector model, underpinned by strong, independent economic regulation. It has been 30 years since the privatisation of the water industry in England and Wales, but the industry has continued to evolve and has always been underpinned by regulation through Ofwat—particularly as the provision of water, unlike that of other utilities, was not opened up to the market for consumers. We have introduced competition for business customers, but all the evidence that I have seen as water Minister predicts that opening up the market causes bills to go up rather than down, at least initially. One of the reasons we support the model as it is—which is not to say that policy may not change in future—is to ensure that Ofwat continues to effectively challenge water companies. Back in 2009, Welsh Water was challenged by the regulator to reduce its bills, and indeed it did—it reduced its operating costs by 20% to make that happen.

Since privatisation, approximately £140 billion has been invested in infrastructure. That is equivalent to £5 billion per year—almost double the level prior to privatisation. Customer satisfaction levels have risen to about 90% and customers are now five times less
likely to suffer interruptions to their supply, eight times less likely to suffer from sewer flooding, and 100 times less likely to experience low flow pressure than in the days when water was a nationalised industry. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) points out, they pay just over £1 a day on average for water to be delivered, treated and returned to the environment in a good state.

I recognise that bills increased significantly, especially in the first 10 years after privatisation. A lot of that was to gather the necessary investment. Average bills have remained flat over the past two decades, however, and are planned to fall by 4% in England by 2025. Some companies, such as Yorkshire Water, are keen to increase prices because they want to invest considerably more from an environmental angle, but that is a decision for Ofwat to agree or disagree to.

We are not complacent. I am very conscious that too much water still leaks out from our system. Significant investment is needed to improve the resilience of our water supply, and corporate and financial behaviours need reform. We have therefore challenged and will keep challenging the industry to continue to improve for customers and for the environment, as well as for shareholder returns.

People talk about dividends, but I am very conscious that the average dividend paid out has fallen: in 2008-09, under a Labour Government, I think it was £2.5 billion, whereas in the past year it was less than £1 billion. We are often accused of being ideological, but—dare I say it—when Labour was in charge, returns to shareholders were a lot more. We have taken action against that.

The hon. Member for Harrow West focused in particular on changing the ownership model of water companies. Although he did not seek to suggest that we nationalise the water industry, he is clearly a supporter of social enterprise and mutual organisations. I am very conscious of the experience he has had with Thames Water, particularly on dividends paid out and with the former owners. The owners have changed and I believe there has been a significant step change in approach, which is most welcome.

A lot has been said about what is happening in Wales. Following the original privatisation, the company covering Wales, which was called Hydery, had expanded into other sectors. After the new Labour Government’s windfall tax in the late 1990s—and other economic challenges—the company effectively collapsed and was acquired by Western Power Distribution. That focused the business and it sold the water division to the two founders of Glas Cymru for £1, with £1.85 billion of debt, and that resulted in Welsh Water.

As has been pointed out, the key difference for that company was that it was created by a small number of people. It does not have shareholders but is limited by guarantee and funded by the bond market, so it still has external financing. One of the ways in which it has adjusted its gearing is to hold very high cash reserves, which helps reduce borrowing. However, I do not think that we necessarily get better value for customers just through every provider having a not-for-profit system. I think the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) who complained to Ofwat a few years ago that customers across the border in Herefordshire, who were supplied by Severn Trent, were paying a lot less for their water bills than people in Wales. While I am conscious that there is not the same pressure on water supply, I am aware that there are particular challenges in the network when it comes to sewerage. It is important to recognise the different catchments, river basins and sources of water on which different water companies rely. Some rely more on water that is gifted from the clouds; others, such as those in the east of England, extract more water. Getting that balance on what is needed right will vary around the country.

As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) was correct to point out, traditionally South West Water has had the largest bills, which is a reflection of the amount of ongoing investment that that area still needs.

Richard Benyon: The Minister is making an extremely good point. People in the south-west had been pleading for years about the cost of cleaning up beaches and other infrastructure problems, but of course the Labour Government ignored those pleas. It was the coalition Government who got a £50 reduction for every single bill in the west country, which was extremely valued by water customers in the south-west.

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend is correct, and that has been considered. The balance is very important. However, we need to continue to challenge South West Water to make sure its investment is effective. The hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) talked about the challenges on sewage, and there are particular challenges in the south-west on aspects of combined overflows. We continue to press the company to make sure that it is maximising the investment on improvements.

Gareth Thomas: Will the Minister comment on two points? I mentioned in an earlier intervention that, since Scottish Water was set up in its current form, the price of water is 2% lower in real terms, while water bills in England have gone up by an average of 13% in real terms. Secondly, in the current price review, does the Minister intend to require Ofwat to significantly lower the cost of capital, which is included in the amount that Ofwat allows water companies to charge?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware that I have the power to direct Ofwat on exactly how it comes up with its cost of capital. My understanding is that it has reduced what it assumes to be appropriate for the weighted average cost of capital, but I expect the price review to be published shortly. I am due a briefing from Ofwat within the next week on that particular issue.

On prices, Severn Trent’s average bill is still lower than that of Scottish Water. I want to bring some facts into the debate. The need for ongoing investment in the water industry will vary around the country, as will what water companies put forward as necessary for the changes we require.

Ofwat has highlighted the benefit of modernising licence modification powers, after the Secretary of State asked it to look into what further powers it felt it needed. We are currently consulting publicly on that proposal and will make a final decision after the consultation. If we decide to proceed, we hope to bring that forward in a legislative vehicle in the next Session.
The Government’s strategic policy statement in 2017 set out the need to improve protections for vulnerable customers. To help water companies achieve that, the Government introduced data-sharing provisions in the Digital Economy Act 2017 to better identify those who may need help with their bills. Companies have responded positively to that challenge in their draft business plans. Between 2020 and 2025, they have pledged to reduce dividends and bills, increase investment to £50 billion, improve transparency on executive pay and increase the uptake of social tariffs by nearly 90%. Welsh Water’s level of investment is nowhere near as high as that of the average water company in England.

I am pleased that many water companies have set out how they will share profits with customers either directly or through community benefit schemes. They have set challenging targets to extend their support to vulnerable customers, including a commitment from Northumbrian Water and South West Water to eradicate water poverty in their regions.

The industry plans to reduce leakage by 16% by 2025 and has set the ambitious target of a 50% reduction by 2050. Companies also plan to reduce individual water use by 2045, targeting 83% metering penetration and a per capita consumption of 123 litres, which would be a significant improvement on today’s average of 141 litres in England. We will hold them to account on those plans and we will take action ourselves. In our water conservation report, which was published just before Christmas, I said that we would carry out a call for evidence and a consultation on the measures we can take to reduce demand.

Even though we expect that leakage will fall and demand will drop, water supply still needs to be increased. To ensure key infrastructure can be delivered on time, we are consulting on a draft national policy statement for water resources infrastructure, which will streamline the planning process for new large water infrastructure projects, such as reservoirs, desalination plants and water transfers. We expect companies to collaborate with one another on regional water resource plans that transcend company boundaries, to identify the most cost-effective solutions for each region and for the nation. That includes water companies considering other water users in their plans and working together where appropriate. The Environment Agency’s national framework for water resources will support that work.

It is important to recognise the regulators of the water industry, namely the Drinking Water Inspectorate, the Environment Agency and DEFRA, which itself continues to regulate on a small number of matters. They all have good powers to protect consumers and the environment.

The work of the Consumer Council for Water has been referred to. As the consumer body, its role is to hold the water companies to account on behalf of customers. It acts for both residential and business customers. We want to see a water industry that puts customers at the heart of the business, contributes to society and protects our precious natural environment. We will continue to push the sector and to hold it to account, to ensure that it achieves those objectives.

10.59 am

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee, to you, Mr Gray, for chairing the debate, and to my hon. Friends and other hon. Members for taking the time to take part. I think the mutual route to democratic public ownership offers significant advantages over the current privatised system. Customers and employees would be in charge of the very services they depend on. There would be no cost to the taxpayer involved in the change of ownership. Profits would be reinvested in the business and continued borrowing for investment would be feasible. On that basis, this has been a very useful debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the water industry in England and Wales.
Cashless Transactions

11 am

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cashless transactions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in a debate that is already better attended than I had suspected it might be, Mr Gray. It used to be said that cash is king, but in reality that is no longer the case. Politicians used to talk of the pound in your pocket, but today just three out of 10 transactions use cash, whether coins or notes; in 2008, it was six out of 10. The Access to Cash report sponsored by, but independent of, LINK, estimates that just one in 10 transactions will use cash by 2033. I do not intend to call for that to be slowed down, but rather to be sped up. Although 98% of adults in the UK have a debit card and the opportunity to use a cashless or digital transaction, some 46% of them still do not like the idea of a cashless economy, even though there is clear evidence that the vast majority of people would be better off in a cashless world.

The so-called poverty premium costs each of our constituents hundreds of pounds a year. Those hit hardest by using cash and sticking to the tried-and-tested methods are disabled people who live in medium-size market towns, where it is estimated to cost over £500 a year not to take advantage of the better tariffs and so forth available online. There is a huge premium on people who are not taking full advantage of the latest digital technology and contactless cards.

There are 2.2 million people who say that they rely day to day on cash. Only 2.5% of those in higher income groups say they do, compared with 15% of those earning under £10,000 a year. There is a clear sense that the greater number of people relying on cash in their everyday life would benefit most from not using it so much. That is why I am calling on the Minister to speed up the Government’s bid to increase the use of the cashless economy, which has not yet yielded the results that we might want to see.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue to Westminster Hall; I am very aware of it in my rural constituency. Does he agree that it is essential that we ensure the viability of cash transactions due to continuing cyber-security issues? This is especially true in the case of rural areas such as my constituency of Strangford, where people cannot rely on the availability of digital means at all times. In other words, cash is king in my constituency and it cannot be ignored.

Matt Warman: The hon. Gentleman is currently right, but we will all be better off if we hasten the transition, so that people do not have to rely on cash and all of our constituents can use more secure and efficient digital means, whether they live in rural areas such as my constituency and his, or in big cities.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I declare my interest in this issue. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the increasing amount of online fraudware—for example, one of my constituents was defrauded of £40,000 by telephone fraud using her online banking—and the use of crypto-assets for online cashless transactions means that we need more regulation from the Government, so that consumers can trust the system to enforce the rules? Do we not need to give police more powers to tackle those who use cashless transactions for criminal purposes?

Matt Warman: I completely agree. Much of this is about trust. It is true, as I said, that 46% of people do not trust a cashless society, whether that involves crypto-currencies—although I suspect most of those 46% are not wholly familiar with every detail of that—or simply contactless cards. Part of this is about regulation; much of it is about trust.

It is worth examining in a small amount of detail why people want to continue to use cash. About 20% say it makes them feel more in control, 16% say it helps them with budgeting, and 3% want to hide their guilty pleasures—perhaps we had best not dwell on those. Some 5% do not trust online transactions at all, and 3% just do not trust the banks. That is a real issue if this trend is to be mitigated for vulnerable groups where needed and if the broader society is to take advantage of cashless transactions.

Countries such as Sweden already have twice the level of cashless transactions as we have in the UK, and their authorities have taken conscious action to slow down the pace of cashless-ising, to ensure that vulnerable groups are not left behind. It is also reported that 4,000 people in Sweden have had chips inserted under their skin, so that they do not even have to use cards—I am not sure that I would go quite that far, although I know the Minister might want to consider it as a personal experiment.

We are at risk of ending up with two cultures: those who embrace a wholly digital way of living, and those who do not. There has been an 8.5% decline in the use of ATMs in London, but just a 2% decline in Northern Ireland and a 2.9% decline in my area of the east Midlands. There are very different views on what is important for people and on the pace of change.

It is instructive to look at what people use cash for. Figures from the LINK report show that just 13% of people pay their rent in cash—disproportionately those on lower incomes. Some 85% said that they use cash to pay for taxis, which is a particularly instructive example. That is obviously a nationwide figure rather than a conversation about London taxis, on which we could perhaps spend many hours. Taxis are a particularly interesting example because the giving of cash to a driver makes them more vulnerable to theft and to being a target for crime. It also means that they are responsible for ensuring that they have change, so they have to carry a float even before they have taken any cash. It is of course true to say that it would be naive in today’s society to get into a cab outside London and expect the driver to take a card transaction. This is a complex landscape.

Some four out of five people say that they pay their gardener—if they have one—in cash. I am sure that neither the Minister nor I wish to cast aspersions on gardeners, but there is a suspicion that there are parts of the economy where cash is used to avoid the tax that I know he is very eager to collect at every possible opportunity. There are a whole host of reasons to promote cashless transactions, whether it is ensuring
that people are at less risk of the crime that goes with cash or that businesses are at less risk of the increasingly expensive costs of handling cash.

Jim Shannon: I am mindful that in my constituency of Strangford, where we have a fishing sector, there is a tradition of boat owners paying their crewmen in cash. There has been a reduction in the number of banks across the whole of the Ards peninsula. Seasonal workers are also paid in cash. I put forward to the hon. Gentleman that one size does not fit all and that there are exceptions. We need to be aware of that, as does the Minister.

Matt Warman: I agree. In a sense, I make the same point that I made before, which is that currently there are a large number of exceptions and it would actually be in the interests of the many seasonal, low-paid and often zero-hours contract workers in my constituency to be paid digitally, because they would be less at risk of crime and the businesses that they work for would have less of the handling costs associated with cash. We are already at the point where the declining ATM network that those people rely on is struggling to make a viable business case to those who use it with such diminishing enthusiasm.

Darren Jones: The case study of First Bus in Bristol—I would not speak accurately on behalf of my constituents if I said it was a cheap network—demonstrates that the use of digital payments has allowed a reduction in the cost of tickets because cash is no longer handled on the bus network. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that that must be a positive for consumers, whether or not they use cash?

Matt Warman: I agree. That is an example of where digital payments are in the interests of both the business and the consumer—not simply in terms of convenience, but, in the case the hon. Gentleman mentioned, in terms of the viability of the bus route. Companies such as Square have tried to encourage marketplaces to embrace digital technology in such a way that businesses that often operate at the very limit of viability are able to find new and innovative ways of changing their business models slightly. Of course, it is no good for a business to accept cards only when people wish to show up and pay in cash. The London bus network experienced some controversy when it moved to using a card-only payment mechanism, and I suspect that the hon. Gentleman may have experienced the same in his constituency.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, it comes back to ensuring that a one-size-fits-all force is not exerted either by Government or by business, but that a number of things are done to encourage businesses to understand that there are huge advantages, and to encourage consumers to understand that there are very limited opportunities for fraud when it comes to contactless cards or, indeed, chip and pin. We should be careful not to stoke those sorts of fears unnecessarily.

There are costs associated with handling cash and there are associated costs for consumers—socioeconomic risks for those who are often most reliant on cash but would benefit most from digital payments, for example. We therefore need to ask the Minister for a number of things to encourage shops and businesses to go cashless and whether there should be a safety net to ban them from becoming entirely cashless, as has happened in some states in America. I would argue that in most circumstances, the retailer of any kind is perfectly entitled to make that decision for itself. We should not sleepwalk into a cashless society, however; we should understand the risks and the benefits.

With that in mind, my single largest request to the Minister is not that we try to invent some system in which, as someone proposed, a business rates scheme encourages cashless-ising in town centres, to encourage businesses to become more viable and eliminate costs to which they might be sentimentally attached, but simply to build on the success that Britain has already shown both in FinTech and in technology more generally. That means putting the governmental shoulder to the wheel and recognising that ultimately, the cost of taking cash is already very close—if not over the line—to outweighing the benefits. We are certainly already at the point where many businesses looking at that in detail would think very hard about whether taking cash was in their interests at all. Clearly, the moment when far more businesses go over that line is fast approaching.

We need to do two things. The first is to consider much more carefully the impact that eliminating cash can have on vulnerable groups in certain circumstances. Then, we must say what we can do to help those groups to embrace a cashless economy with much greater enthusiasm. Some of that means reassuring people about their concerns on the risks of fraud, while another part means defining—as the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned—what can always be paid in cash, at least for a long time into the future.

Would the Minister consider setting out a roadmap for the future proportion of cash in the economy, to reassure us that it has been entirely considered and that its impact has been thought through? If I had my way, I would set a target for the elimination of cash from the economy, in much the same way that—in an ideal world—I would think carefully about when cheques might be eliminated entirely from the economy. I appreciate that setting any type of target in that regard is probably down to the market as much as it is to Government, but whether or not there is a target, the trajectory is ultimately very clear: there will be less and less cash in the economy and that will mean certain things for vulnerable groups. Our job as politicians is to provide some leadership and tell people and businesses that it is economically advantageous for there to be less cash in the economy, however sentimental some people might feel about where we are in today’s society.

I will leave that gentle request there, rather than demand anything more of the Minister, but I would say that the direction of travel is clear: cash was king, but it is now coming towards the end of its reign.

11.17 am

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and to respond to the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman). I thank him for his suggestion that I get a chip implanted in my arm—I have only just started paying with my Apple watch, so that might be some way off. I will suggest it to the Chancellor as something that he might like to do.
As my hon. Friend laid out, all the evidence suggests that people are increasingly turning to digital payment methods. In 2017, debit cards overtook cash as the most frequently used payment method in the UK. The Government support digital payments, which, as we have heard in the debate, can offer consumers and businesses convenient, tailored and flexible ways of purchasing goods and services. Increasingly, they can also offer additional services, such as ways to help budget, keep a record of transactions and manage financial affairs, which can play an important role for those who, traditionally, would be considered more vulnerable and harder to serve.

As my hon. Friend also mentioned, the public support and trust our historic currency in cash and notes—perhaps to an surprising extent. We have seen that over the course of the past 12 months, with campaigns to save the penny and for a Brexit coin, and the Royal Mint sees it every day with the demand for collector’s coins, both on its website and at its south Wales shop. The pace of technological change has never been faster, and it will never seem so slow again as it continues to accelerate. Like my hon. Friend, we want the UK to be at the forefront of technological change, to embrace the opportunities and, as we have heard from the tenor of the debate, to ensure that that change works for as many people in society as possible. That includes taking a lead in supporting the Competition and Markets Authority’s open banking initiative, which aims to make it cheaper and easier for innovative new firms to provide financial products.

Building on that, the Government have tried to lead on FinTech with our FinTech sector strategy, which was published last year and sets out our plans for ensuring that the UK remains the best place in the world to start and grow a FinTech firm. Nearly 100,000 people in the UK now work in the FinTech sector; almost none of those jobs existed just 10 years ago. The UK genuinely is a market leader in this field. We have already heard examples of those firms, which are transforming the financial services sector. TransferWise, which set up in London eight years ago, is another. It now serves more than 4 million customers and transfers more than £3 billion of funds every month.

The wider payments industry is also embracing new technology. For example, as a result of legislation brought in by this Government, UK banks and building societies have been able to introduce cheque imaging. That innovation offers people the additional option of paying in a cheque through their smartphone rather than having to go to a bank. That benefits people who are harder to serve, such as those my hon. Friend mentioned—people in rural areas and those with limited mobility.

As my hon. Friend said, digital payment technologies offer considerable opportunities for everyone, including vulnerable people. Ensuring that the UK leads in this area offers opportunities for new FinTech businesses and jobs, and exports, which I just mentioned. It also provides extra flexibility and convenience for businesses and consumers, such as those who travel by bus or taxi in London or, as we heard, by bus in Bristol. If we get the technology right and ensure it is sufficiently competitive, it may provide lower transaction costs for consumers and small businesses. As we heard, it also offers us the opportunity to lower the tax gap, which would mean lower taxes for all the rest of us who pay our fair share of taxes, and there will be public safety benefits if we can ensure correct enforcement and increased public trust. A number of shops and music festivals have suggested they may go cash free to reduce criminality.

Darren Jones: I referred to my constituent who was defrauded via an online method. She contacted the police, Action Fraud and the bank, but no one was able to help her and she lost her money. Will the Minister set out what his Department is doing with the Home Office to ensure that the police are properly equipped and resourced to tackle these issues?

Robert Jenrick: We work closely with the Home Office on economic crime. In fact, last week the Chancellor and the Home Secretary launched a new taskforce on economic crimes, which will include cyber-security and digital payments. Of course, we work across the full range of financial institutions and authorities to ensure that they take this issue seriously. The Government’s cyber-security strategy, in which we have invested almost £2 billion, is designed to increase capability and awareness among financial institutions and police forces across the country. Police forces need to take this issue very seriously as crime changes.

It is also worth mentioning the societal benefits of developments in other parts of the world, particularly in Africa and the developing world, where organisations and companies that have taken the lead on mobile payment services, such as M-Pesa, have been truly transformational in opening up new opportunities for entrepreneurship and person-to-person payments. We have seen that happen in those parts of the world, and we want it to happen in this country, too.

We heard about some of the challenges associated with the increase in digital payments and the falling use of cash. It is worth noting that cash payments fell from 61% of all payments in 2007 to 34% in 2017. However, 34% is still a significant proportion, and about 2.7 million people in the UK remain entirely reliant on cash. We must ensure that those who rely on cash are not excluded as digital payments become more prevalent. We can of course play a role in guiding them to see some of the benefits and opportunities of digital payments. My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness mentioned examples of people for whom digital payments may be very useful indeed, such as those on lower incomes and migrant workers.

We launched a call for evidence last year to better understand the role of cash and digital payments in the new economy, to explore questions such as how we can maintain access to cash for those who need it, and to better understand the trajectory of cash use. We concluded that although we are probably heading towards a cashless society, we should seek to facilitate and encourage that. Cash—our coins and notes—will be with us for a long time to come, so its continued availability in all parts of the country for all groups needs to be planned carefully by the Government, financial institutions such as the Royal Mint and the Bank of England, and the payments industry.

We are working closely with the industry, which recognises the challenges. Last year, LINK, the UK’s ATM network, announced an independent review of
access to cash, chaired by Natalie Ceeney, in response to some of the concerns and criticisms raised over the course of 2018 about the decline in the number of ATMs, particularly in rural areas. It is true that there are probably too many ATMs in some of our urban areas, but there is real concern about the number of ATMs in smaller market towns, on the smaller high streets of larger cities such as Bristol, and particularly in villages. The review is exploring the risks of leaving people behind as we increasingly utilise digital payments. As we heard, its interim report found that many consumers still value having cash.

The wholesale cash industry is also considering the infrastructure required to continue to service cash use as it declines. That will be a serious challenge in the years to come, and we want to be prepared for it. How can we ensure that every shop, restaurant, post office and community in every part of the country, including rural areas, continues to be able to obtain the cash it needs? How can that business model be either profitable or supported by the rest of the economy? In addition, the payments industry is progressing initiatives such as Request to Pay, which can help increase and promote financial inclusion. The Request to Pay service aims to give payers more control over outgoing payments and to help people avoid the cliff edges that can be created by irregular incomes or unexpected bills.

The rise in digital payments has been remarkable. It is not unique to this country; it is happening in all parts of the world, including in perhaps unexpected places such as Africa and the developing world. Contactless payments in this country grew by 99% in 2017, and we expect that trajectory to continue. We welcome proposals to enable the UK to embrace that change. There are no simple solutions, but we look at international examples, such as Singapore, Hong Kong and other parts of the world that are particularly engaged with this question. Hon. Members from across the House with proposals and ideas are very welcome to come to see me or other Treasury Ministers as we consider how we can continue to engage with this issue and drive the sector forward.

We need to consider the impact of the increasingly digital world on society and our economy and find ways to overcome the challenges it presents. Cash use remains important, with more than one third of payments in the UK made in cash. However, like my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness, we want to guide the economy and the public through the undoubtedly and probably irreversible journey to a cashless society, and we want to ensure that the UK is at the forefront of new technology while protecting the most vulnerable in our society.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am
Sitting suspended.
not in control of their circumstances in many regards. For them to be put through a harrowing process and feel that way is simply unacceptable.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the number of forms that people suffering with mental health conditions have to complete is a real problem? It can cause unnecessary stress during difficult times, especially when many of the forms are duplicated.

Angela Crawley: I could not agree more. During last week’s debate on fibromyalgia, she explained how the process and the application forms simply do not pay respect to mental health conditions. I champion her calls to the Government to change that process.

I urge the Minister to look through the comments, to get an idea of how the policies really impact people and to understand what they have gone through. Standing here and reading out the comments does them no justice; it is only by reading them that she will get an understanding of their point of view.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): The hon. Lady’s stories are a perfect depiction of the fact that the process is not adequately designed to assess mental health and wellbeing. Instead, it is a functionality test that lacks understanding of the nuances and fluctuation of mental health. If anything, the process actually exacerbates mental illness, meaning that people drop out of the cruel system to avoid and end acute worry. Let us hope that the Minister will not try to individualise the problems by saying, “Come and see us about these cases,” and that she will acknowledge the systemic failure of the assessment process.

Angela Crawley: I completely agree. I know that the Minister is always receptive and keen to understand and learn more. I am not going to harp on and give her a hard time about this. I am simply trying to change a process that I think we all want to see improved.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Crawley: I would like to make some progress first.

I am grateful to everyone who contacted me and took the time to comment, both on Facebook and through email, especially those who were brave enough to come forward and share their story. It is vital, given the needs of people with mental health issues, that the Government take time to listen to them.

Over the past few years there have been a great many public understanding and national awareness campaigns on mental health. Where mental health was once kept a secret from family, friends and colleagues, more and more people feel able to come forward and openly discuss their experiences of mental illness and get the necessary help. That recognition is largely due to the tireless work of national campaigns such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health, Mind and many others.

On 10 October last year, the Prime Minister held a reception to celebrate World Mental Health Day and to make a policy announcement, which included the creation of a Minister for suicide prevention. The Prime Minister said, “we are not looking after our health if we are not looking after our mental health...we need that true parity between physical and mental health, not just in our health systems but elsewhere as well—in our classrooms, our workplaces, in our communities too.”

I agree with all of those points, but I would add that one of the biggest and most positive changes would be parity of esteem between mental and physical health in Government Departments themselves. That would be the place to start.

The highest number of people who seek my support are those who have been denied access or assistance by the Department for Work and Pensions. A common theme of the complaints I hear is that the constituent’s mental health needs have been ignored during work capability assessments for universal credit, employment support allowance and the personal independence payment.

Most of those people have a genuine claim and have been incorrectly assessed. That is because the majority of decisions brought to me are ultimately overturned at the mandatory reconsideration and appeals stage.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. On Friday night I met a number of people with mental health problems. Their issue is that the doctor says that they are not fit to work, but the benefits assessor says that they are, which leaves them in limbo. It is also a problem that employers do not always recognise mental illness. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Minister should do something about that?

Angela Crawley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I am sorry that I did not take it earlier. Each and every day, our constituency offices deal with situations where there has been an issue with the Department for Work and Pensions. It is our staff who work day in, day out to get those decisions overturned. If we have to do that, and if decisions are being repeatedly overturned, there is obviously a flaw in the system.

Several hon. Members rose—

Angela Crawley: I will let the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who tried to intervene earlier, speak first.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. Clearly, there is competition for interventions because this is such an important issue. On the question of process, a constituent of mine scored zero on an employment and support allowance assessment despite having numerous and well-documented physical and mental health problems. The decision was overturned on appeal. The appeal was a gruelling process to go through but the decision was readily overturned, because there was a basic factual error in the first stage. Does the hon. Lady agree that the process would be much more effective if claimants had the option of their assessments being recorded, as recommended by Paul Gray, the independent reviewer? Does she share my hope that the Minister will update us on the pilot announced last June and confirm that her Department will go ahead with the recording of interviews?
Angela Crawley: I agree that there are issues with the service and the process.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She will have seen, as I have, the number of people who visit constituency surgeries after having had an initial assessment for a physical health problem but then ending up with a mental health issue as a result of how they were treated and having their support incorrectly withdrawn. Does she agree that that needs to be looked at very seriously?

Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly agree, and that is the point of this debate. If the system worked well and we did not have any complaints about it, we would not be here today, but the fact is that the system is not working as it should, nor as it was probably intended to work in its initial design or concept. It is simply not working in practice. If we were to amend that system work in its initial design or concept. It is simply not working in practice. If we were to amend that system and make it work better, we would probably spend less time going through administrative appeals and mandatory reconsiderations, which should incentivise the Government to get it right the first time.

Returning to my earlier point, it is my staff who deal with constituents’ cases every day, and I would like to say thank you to each and every one of them, Rhona, Josh, David, John, Mary-Jane, Carmen and, of course, Georgia—I have quite a few staff and think I have covered them all—work hard every day to have those cases overturned, because they can see the constituent before them and can see that person who is crying out for help and needs support.

Perhaps the assessors are just not getting that full picture of someone, and perhaps we are being unfair to all the staff who work at DWP, but there is a flaw in the process, which I will turn to now. The assessments are carried out by contractors of Maximus and Atos according to guidelines set by the Department for Work and Pensions. I know there have been changes and adaptations, but ultimately they are still not working. Turning to the administrative process administered by DWP, those assessment reports are then filtered into descriptors set by the policies of this Government. I do not believe that the assessors are given the correct level of training or resources to deal with mental health issues. I have written to the Department about that on a number of occasions and I have been assured that assessors are getting adequate training, but if that is not the experience on the ground, there is obviously a flaw or an issue there.

I do not believe that the criteria for assessments give enough credence to the crippling effects that mental ill health can have on people’s lives. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) has outlined, that turns into a detrimental effect on people’s mental health, even if it did not start out that way. Indeed, many of my constituents complained that their mental health problems do not fit neatly into the assessment forms because the form is not designed to assess disability resulting from mental ill health, a point that the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) also covered.

One of my constituents from Hamilton, whose daughter has bipolar disorder and was denied personal independence payments, said, “we see mental health brought up everywhere—in adverts, in TV soaps—and the advice is to speak out. But if you tell the DWP, they ignore you and do nothing to help, they have fallen behind the times and are not keeping up to the standard.”

In the assessment reports, indicators of mental ill health bear little relation to the advice of mental health charities and are at best unhelpful for diagnosis. The assessors will make wide-reaching assertions based on outdated ideas of mental health and often irrelevant judgments on the person’s appearance: “Was the person rocking in a chair? Were they trembling? Were they sweating? What was the person wearing? Had they washed or were they wearing make-up?” That is institutional stereotyping of people suffering from poor mental health. The fact that someone turned out that day and made the effort, even if it perhaps took them hours and days to prepare themselves for that experience, only to then have it marked against them, seems arbitrary and frankly ridiculous.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I am sympathetic to a number of the points the hon. Lady makes, although, for an experienced medical professional, one component of assessing somebody who is unwell is looking at how they appear, because that may be a symptom of distress, self-neglect or other issues, notwithstanding the points she has made. One of the challenges she raised is that of those patients with fluctuating conditions such as bipolar disorder, who can be well for periods and then become quite unwell. Does she agree that the system does not have adequate assessments in place to allow for patients who can become very rapidly unwell, and that those patients in particular can become distressed by the system and how it is put into practice by assessors?

Angela Crawley: I agree with the second part of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, but I return to my original point, which is that we are talking about a tick-box exercise that does not recognise the fluctuating nature of mental ill health—I think that is the point he is trying to make. Why should someone have the fact that they put make-up on that day, or made the effort to turn up and be there for the assessment, marked against them? It seems completely arbitrary and unnecessary.

The constituent I mentioned earlier has a nervous compulsion and, as a result, she picks at her nails. She has chosen to wear acrylic nails so that she will not unconsciously pick at her hands due to her nervous disposition. That was taken by the healthcare professional as an indicator that she was well kept and therefore mentally stable. It did not seem to matter that it was a form of self-harming and that she had had suicidal thoughts, which she outlined to the person. Those are Victorian and antiquated measures through which to identify someone with mental ill health, and they come up time and again. My constituent Donna from Carlisle recently had a personal independence assessment. She acknowledged that she had two options: she could present as someone who had a mental illness and “Present as they expect someone who has a mental illness to i.e and I quote here from your own assessment documentation ‘rock, shake, sweat, unkempt, poor eye contact and look unwell and troubled’”, or she could present as she was on the day, “which was apparently none of the above.”
That does not negate the fact that she has a mental health condition; it simply does not tick the markers on that sheet. The DWP tick-box system does not seem to account for that at all, nor for people who live with long-term chronic health conditions that fluctuate between good days, bad days and unimaginable days.

Donna has faced an extremely difficult few years trying to cope with severe depression. She has outlined that on one day she can be great and on another she is simply not. I take the point that the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) made; I know it comes from a position of experience, and I greatly appreciate his expertise, but the fact is that Donna has been working in the mental health sector, so she has huge insight into her condition. She knew the only way she would get better would be by taking time and allowing herself to heal, which has taken longer than she had hoped, but now that she has returned to work, she has to fight to keep her personal independence payment, which has allowed her to stabilise her life.

I mentioned this case in a debate last week. Donna recently went back to work on very reduced hours, and through the personal independence payment, she was able to effectively self-manage her condition, meaning that she can lead a meaningful and purposeful life, return to work and provide for her family. Given the presence of her symptoms, that is only possible through the personal independence payment, which she is now being denied because the fact that she returned to work has been held against her. She exactly fits the purpose of those benefits and the criteria set out, but her claim was reassessed and, as a direct result of returning to work, she is no longer entitled to them.

It seems that all the valuable support Donna received over the last three years, combined with her self-determination, is now in jeopardy because, on the day of her PIP assessment, she was: “well kempt, behaved normally, maintained eye contact and had good insight into my illness”.

Those are the assessor’s marks. They have decided against the criteria that she is no longer eligible for a personal independence payment, despite the fact that, as I am outlining, she relies on it and it has helped her to get back to work, which I believe is ultimately what the Government want. It is counter-intuitive. Healthcare professionals appear to be carrying out assessments without prior knowledge of how mental ill health works.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some extremely valid and excellent points, and I thank her for securing the debate. Does she agree that there is a real issue for people whose mental ill health, and perhaps some of the symptoms of it, such as paranoia or severe depression, mean that it is extremely difficult for them to even go to an assessment, because they feel the system might be against them, or they are just not well enough to get there? They are then penalised, and have their benefits taken away when they are very much in need of them, and have been very ill for a long time.

Angela Crawley: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and with the comments from the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) about the individual who prepared themselves for an assessment, only for the assessor not to turn up. These assessments are really distressing, and they do not take into account the condition that the person being assessed has, or the impact that the assessment might have. Another of my constituents, Denise from Hamilton, was denied assistance for bipolar disorder because, as the report repeatedly stated, she is not manic all the time or on most days. How does one assessor even know that?

The idea of requiring assistance during periods of mania completely misses the point about the problems that Denise faces. The report ignores the depressive cycles that follow, and her struggles to find a measure of stability. That is a reckless approach, as she would be sent into a manic state if she were not supported, or if she tried to live the way many of us without a disability take for granted. Some of the things that have triggered a manic state in my constituent over the years would wash over most of us without her condition, but that is why the condition is extremely harrowing and distressing for those who have it. Simple things such as preparing for Christmas or a family wedding, stressful news events such as the Grenfell Tower incident, wider health issues such as the menopause, and changes to Denise’s medication for bipolar disorder are all things that have exacerbated her condition. Additionally, she has sometimes entered into mania for no apparent reason. In other words, the condition is out of her control.

I have heard many reports of assessors using very inappropriate language during assessments for people with mental health problems. Several people, including constituents I have mentioned, have told me that when discussing suicidal thoughts, they have been asked bluntly, “Why didn’t you kill yourself?” I do not know what that adds to the assessment, or what it does to a person to be asked that, but this point has been repeated by many of my constituents. When they have discussed suicidal ideation, they have been asked by the assessor, “Well, why didn’t you kill yourself?” I cannot say why they have been asked that.

Dr Poulter: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Crawley: I will if the hon. Gentleman is going to say something useful.

Dr Poulter: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; she is being very kind. In relation to getting a full picture of suicidality, there are sometimes protective factors that stop people wanting to take their own life. For example, they may have children. There may be other factors in their life that mean that they would not want to go through with the act of ending their life, even though they are having fleeting suicidal thoughts. It is relevant to a clinical examination or history of a person to work out what protective factors there may be, and why it was that, even though they were feeling very bad, very low, and having those thoughts, they did not want to follow them through. I just wanted to make that clinical point to the hon. Lady; it may be helpful for her constituents.

Angela Crawley: That would be absolutely fine if the assessor had that level of medical qualification and experience. The point is that they do not. It is fine for a doctor to say that they would ask those questions, and of course any doctor reasonably would, but that is not...
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a very powerful speech. Are not DLA and its successor, PIP, meant to be about supporting disabled people with the extra costs that they face, which are about £560 a month? This system fails to recognise the real injustice that disabled people are experiencing, and unfortunately the Government are just not addressing that.

Angela Crawley: I completely agree. The point is that mental illness is a disability—that is what we have argued in previous debates—and should be recognised as such and handled appropriately. I am grateful for the point made by the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, but we are not having this debate because there is an issue with the healthcare system; I am arguing that there is an issue with the practitioners in the Department for Work and Pensions.

The question to which I have referred has been asked without any follow-up, without any understanding and without the qualification and experience to handle it appropriately. I just cannot understand how it is appropriate or why it is necessary for the assessor to ask that. The ultimate fact is that it can be devastating for people with suicidal depression to have to justify such a dark thought; it can shake the foundations of their wellbeing and make them question their worth. It is not uncommon to hear from people that their personal independence payment or work capability assessments have made them feel worthless. It is not uncommon to hear that from my constituents; indeed, it is all too regular. That is why I am raising this matter with the Minister.

Since 2011, assessors are meant to have had, as part of the assessment process, access to a mental function champion or mental health champion for support and training. I am not sure whether that is working in practice, which is why I urge the Minister to look at it. In not one of the cases that I have dealt with regarding mental health problems has a mental function champion been used. That prompts the question: if the training and capacity are there, why is it that not being used by the local DWP jobcentre staff? Why is it not being used to assess people appropriately? Why are assessors not using the support that is available to them if it is in fact there, provided by the Department for Work and Pensions?

I have made challenges in a number of cases in which some support for the assessor on mental health issues would have been appropriate, yet such an intervention has never been used. I have had trouble trying to find concrete figures for how many mental function champions there are across the service and what their role is. I would be grateful if the Minister could enlighten us on exactly what the mental function champions are supposed to do, what role they are supposed to play in the assessments, and how their effectiveness is being measured, because ultimately I was unable to get relevant or accurate statistics from the Department outlining how well that function is being used. If it is there and not being used, it seems that assessors are doing a disservice to the individuals who come face to face with them every day.

When someone is found fit for work but in fact is not, they need to go through the arduous process of appeals. For people with a depressive or other mental illness, that process is extremely difficult and can exacerbate their symptoms. For some, the process is too daunting and they will simply go without the support that they need. I can only imagine the number, because we will not have accurate statistics for how many people go without as they are unwilling to go through that process. I do not believe that that is the right approach to mental illness—or to public expenditure; it would save the Government time and money if assessments were correct, and the correct benefits were awarded at the first stage, in the first instance. The fact that people are having to go through the appeals process and decisions are being overturned at the mandatory reconsideration stage tells us that there is something wrong with the system that could be fixed.

Not only is this a waste of resources for the Department for Work and Pensions and our courts system, but it depletes the mental resources of people who do not have the energy to spare to go through the process. I believe that, ultimately, discrimination against mentally ill people is built into the whole culture of this system. If people disagree with that, they can just ask the High Court. The Government were found in 2018 to have discriminated against mentally ill people in the High Court ruling on regulations that meant that people who were unable to travel for reasons of psychological distress were debarred from the enhanced rate of the mobility component of personal independence payment.

I do not even know where to start with that. If someone has identified under the previous, legacy system that they are unable to travel or have limitations, and then that is undermined in the new system, that seems counter-intuitive. There is surely a better way of operating. The transition from DLA to personal independence payment has been anything but smooth; in fact, there are still flaws and errors in the system. That is all that I am trying to get to here. I really want the system to work better for people, because ultimately I would rather not have to deal with individuals having this horrible experience every day. They should not have to come to me to get things improved; the system should just work better.

The regulation to which I referred was introduced in March 2017 without any stakeholder consultation. I urge the Minister to reconsider that. There are mental health charities and experts outside the House who would be able to provide the relevant and necessary information to the Minister, if she were willing to hear it. That civic engagement would get things correct for those who have used the service and had an adverse experience; it could only enhance and improve the experience.

The High Court ruling represents just a small part of the benefits system, but I think that it represents well the Government’s approach to people with mental health problems. The personal independence payment, contrary to the Government rhetoric, was designed so that fewer people would be eligible for it than were for the legacy benefit of DLA. If the entire concept and...
design of a system is to get more people out of the system, it is not really doing what it was designed for, which was to help people. It just seems ridiculous that we are working to these arbitrary targets; that is the only way I can understand this. If we are trying to reduce the number of people on the benefit, even if there is no reduction in the number of people who need the support, ultimately we are just letting people fall through the net. That is a dereliction of our duty of care to the people we serve.

One quarter of people claiming DLA for mental health conditions do not qualify for PIP when reassessed, so they lose the support that they need.

Andrea Jenkyns: I welcome a lot of the comments that the hon. Lady has made. I do feel that, as a society and as a Government, we still have a long way to go. However, does she acknowledge that mental health funding has reached record levels? We are talking about £12 billion of funding. Does she at least welcome the fact that the Government have now made big commitments to mental health funding?

Angela Crawley: On the one hand, I wholeheartedly agree that any additional funding for mental health will always be welcomed, because we are more aware of the condition and its lifelong effects, but ultimately why are we throwing money against the wall, when at the other end of the process people have to undergo a horrible and unnecessary experience? Join the dots: to improve the health service, improve the service in another Department that gives people the financial support they need. If improvements can be made through one Department, that should be done for another. I have spoken for longer than I intended, and a lot of other hon. Members want to speak, so I will press on.

The Government need to rethink their approach to the needs of people making benefit claims. They must be cognisant of the effect of mental health. Assessments must be more in line with best practice on mental health, so I ask the Minister to meet charities and organisations calling for reform of the benefits system.

I do not know how else to convey to the Government how much I just want to make the system better. I am not trying to make political points for the sake of it. I want to give to every constituent we have contacted what they appear to feel privately. The support they deserve, in that sometimes they cannot say publicly what they have to work under. They are clearly restricted as civil servants, in that sometimes they cannot say publicly what they appear to feel privately. The support they tried to give to every constituent we have contacted them about has been outstanding, so I want to place on record the fact that the people in our local jobcentres are doing a great job, but they cannot do the job they want to do, because the rules will not let them.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is addressing the nature and complexity of the changes. Many of us support the long-term objective. However, the number of times issues have been delayed and roll-outs have been put back, and the number of changes, amendments and adjustments all indicate a fundamental flaw at the heart of the concept. Does he agree that we need to address that, rather than tinker at the edges?

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to contribute to this debate. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing this debate, for her excellent speech, and for the tireless work she is doing on behalf of her constituents and many others.

In my constituency office we have the equivalent of a full-time employee doing nothing but fixing mistakes made by the DWP in assessments. I have no reason to believe it is any better in other constituencies. We could be talking about an army of people funded by the taxpayer just to sort out the mess created by a Government Department. During my three and a half years in this place, one significant area that has generated a lot of work has been the appalling treatment of constituents if they have assessments based on mental problems or a combination of physical disability and mental health problems.

In theory and in principle, I agree with what the Government claim to be trying to do through the benefits system. In practice, what they are really doing is completely wrong and I cannot support it at all. Having said that, I will not hear one word of criticism against the people who work in my local jobcentres, because they are fantastic. They do everything possible to help people, but they are tramelled by the regulations that they have to work under. They are clearly restricted as civil servants, in that sometimes they cannot say publicly what they appear to feel privately. The support they tried to give to every constituent we have contacted them about has been outstanding, so I want to place on record the fact that the people in our local jobcentres are doing a great job, but they cannot do the job they want to do, because the rules will not let them.

Peter Grant: My view is that the fundamental flaw was built into the system from day one, when the entire review started from the bottom line of financial saving and everything else was built on top of that. A benefits system cannot be built on a price tag, especially a price tag significantly lower than the current cost of the benefits system. That will guarantee that a significant number of people will be left a lot worse off than they were. A system has never been invented that ensures that the tiny minority of people who play the system are protected. Far too often, the system hits the easy targets rather than the ones who should be stopped from abusing the system.

What are the assessments for people with mental health problems in the benefits system supposed to do? They are supposed to give additional support to anyone living with a disability that makes it dearer for them to
have the basic essentials of life. They are supposed to provide financial support for people who cannot get into work and help those who will be able to get into work to get there. We must ensure people will never be able to carry out enough work to support themselves financially. For those facing that reality, the system is supposed to help.

Instead, our system makes the situation worse for somebody with mental health problems that prevent them from working. We are talking about things that on their own might not seem that severe, such as anxiety, which can be made worse if they keep getting knocked back or psychologically beaten about. These people struggle just to carry on the usual social contact that some of us take for granted and lack the simple social skills that are essential to survive in the workplace.

For people struggling with those problems due to mental illness, which can be exacerbated by the way they are being treated, the worst thing we can do is force them through a system that makes them feel even less worthwhile than before they went in, even worse about themselves and even more anxious about their next assessment.

We would not assess a blind person with a paper form and we would not assess a deaf person over the phone, unless there was somebody at the other end to interpret for them. Why should it be any different when assessing somebody whose difficulties are related to severe anxiety and the inability to cope with going out the door and taking a bus on their own? They are told to go to an address they have never heard of, in a place they have never been to, to find their way there by a bus that they do not know exists, by a time set by the assessors, and to pay their own way there. By the time they get there, if they are lucky, an assessor will carry out the interview, but if the assessor does not turn up, that is okay. However, if the claimant does not turn up, they get their benefit stopped. Then we wonder why people think the system is rigged against them.

The whole work capability assessment is lengthy and demeaning. It treats people as numbers—as statistics. Sometimes it treats people as problems, instead of as human beings who need the support of a caring and civilised society. For example, most of my constituents are quite surprised, if not astonished, when they discover that it is not routine for the DWP to ask for a report from their GP or community psychiatric nurse, if they have been getting support from a nurse. They will sometimes ask for it, if the claimant themselves insists on them asking for it, but why do they not do it routinely? Surely the person’s own GP and the health professionals—those with qualifications in psychology or psychiatry—who have worked with this person, sometimes for years, have something important to say about their ability to work now and the realistic prospects of them getting back into work in the future.

Tomorrow, it will be exactly a year since I asked an urgent question in the Chamber about changes to personal independence payment assessment criteria. That followed a Government defeat in a case in the High Court where, in essence, the Court ruled that the assessment process the Government had put in place was illegal, because it discriminated between people with mental health problems and people with physical disabilities. On 23 November last year we received an update on that case: 140,000 cases had had to be reviewed and £4.5 million in benefits had been paid back to 1,000 people. I know that the succession of Ministers we have had in the DWP like to quote statistics about the percentage of people who like the result and the percentage of people who do not. In that case, 1,000 people were owed the money, which they needed just to have a decent standard of life. This Government had unlawfully withheld that money from them. We still do not know how many more people are due to get money back once the full review has been carried out. These are not the actions of a caring society.

Some of my constituents have turned up at assessments that were difficult and stressful to get to and found that the assessment had been cancelled. They had paid the cost of getting there, sometimes borrowing money to pay the bus fare, and the assessment was cancelled. At other times they have turned up and the paperwork had been lost or the person who had read the paperwork had phoned in sick. A different assessor had no idea who the person coming in to be assessed was. It is no wonder it creates the impression that, “The system really does not care about me. It does not see me as a human being. It sees me as a problem instead of as a human being with intrinsic value and the same rights to be treated properly as anyone else in our society.”

Debbie Abrahams: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. Is he as concerned as I am about the York University report that came out today, which states that people with mental health conditions are two and a half to three and a half times more likely to have their PIP claim reduced or stopped than people with physical health conditions? Does he share the view of the Royal College of Psychiatrists that if there is parity of esteem for mental health and physical health conditions in the health service, there should also be parity of esteem in social security?

Peter Grant: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s comments. I have not seen the report, but my impression has been that people with significant mental health problems do not always help themselves and act in their own best interest. As a society, we have not got a balance about how far we allow someone to be who they want to be and live their own life. At what point do we step in and say, “You are not doing yourself any favours”? I have met far too many people whose initial problem started with a letter saying they had to go for an assessment, but because they were scared of an assessment, they did not go, and from then on the problems multiplied.

I had one recent case of a constituent whose behaviour admittedly sometimes was completely unacceptable. One of the ways that he responds to the fact that he cannot cope is by getting aggressive. In at least one instance, he caused damage in a DWP office. I cannot condone that, but it turned out that one of the things he was annoyed about was the fact that his benefit had been substantially reduced. He did not think he had seen a letter telling him why it had been reduced, and we could not find anything, either. It turned out the DWP had decided that because he might react badly to being told that, it cut his benefit, but decided not to tell him what it had done. So that information was kept in a part of the system that assessors could see, but he could not. The assessor was supposed to try to help him get back into the workplace. The DWP thinks he is capable of doing
some work, so it thinks he is capable of all the stresses and strains and upsets that go with going out to work in the morning, or in the afternoon, but he cannot be trusted with information about his own claim in case he reacts to it in the wrong way.

I do not think anybody here would like to sit down and design the perfect benefits system from scratch. I do not suggest that I have all the answers, and there will always be difficult judgments to be made. There will always be cases when someone has to decide, “Is this somebody who knows how to work the system and is chancing it, or is this somebody who really needs help?” I would much rather the system was biased a little more towards accepting that a tiny minority of people can play the system in order to make sure that nobody who needs the support of the system is left behind, but the experience of my constituents is that it is very much loaded in the opposite direction. In numerous cases that I have raised with various Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions—more than six since I was elected—after a few months, the answer has come back that the person has abandoned their appeal and is not going through with the latest stage in the process. Some in the DWP see it as a success every time someone does not carry through an appeal, because that means they have accepted the result. They do not think it means they have given up because they simply cannot win against a system that they feel, and sometimes I feel, is designed to stop people getting what they are entitled to get.

If we look at what has been happening since some of the benefits system was devolved to the Scottish Government, they were criticised for not moving quicker, but the first thing they did was to embark on a major consultation and engagement process not only with the usual suspects, but with people who had been through previous processes. They went out and actively looked for people who had either got successful claims or had lost out under the previous system to find out from them what they thought the system should be like.

The Scottish Government have given an assurance that any benefits assessments they are responsible for will not be carried out by private companies, so any suspicion that there is something in it for the private assessor who says no instead of yes is immediately taken out. The DWP will always say that that is not the case, but if a private company hopes to get the contract in a few years’ time, there will always be that suspicion, especially in the minds of those who do not get the result that they want.

We need to go back to the basics of what people are entitled to get either from the benefits system or from any other part of the state. The Scottish Government have said from day one that their system will be based on fairness, dignity and respect. Every one of our citizens deserves that, whether they are dealing with a benefits application to the DWP or in any other interaction with the Government. At the moment, far too many of my constituents do not feel they are being treated fairly. They do not feel they are being respected as human beings and they definitely do not feel that they come out of the process with the dignity that each and every one of us is entitled to. Until that changes, I cannot support the system. I want to see it fundamentally changed or scrapped altogether so that we go back and start again.
Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman feel, as I do, that some of those people are being tested and tried before being given their benefits? That brings on anxiety. Last week’s Demos report is important in reviewing the issue. People should not be tested to get some money.

David Linden: I agree. The hon. Gentleman will have seen that in his constituency caseload and in surgeries. I am sure that all Members see it in surgeries.

I want to mention fibromyalgia. I attended the recent debate on the subject, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns). Fibro campaigners raise the legitimate concern that the DWP does not recognise the significance of mental health in fibromyalgia, which spans anxiety and depression. What work is under way in the Minister’s Department to explore what further training and support can be given in that area, including to work coaches?

There is much more to be done to ensure that the most vulnerable people can go about their lives in the knowledge that the process of assessing them for benefits will be underpinned by dignity, respect and human rights. The current system does not get that right, with the result that the British Government are failing the most vulnerable in society. I think we would all agree that we can and must do better.

Because of the respect I have for the Minister, I believe she is the Minister who can take the matter forward. We look to her for encouragement when she replies. There is strong cross-party consensus that we want to work together to protect our most vulnerable constituents. I look forward to supporting the Minister as she takes the matter forward.

3.21 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate, and to follow those who set the scene. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) made a significant contribution, as did my colleagues and friends left and right. We may not agree on the constitutional position of Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom, or Scotland and Wales, but we agree on the important issue we are debating.

The Minister attending this debate is one who responds. Her comments to me in the Chamber, and whenever we meet, are soft-spoken words, which are always taken in the light in which they are meant. I thank her for her help and the interest she shows in the issues I bring to her attention. My comments today are not meant to be aggressive or harsh, but they are factual. Before I go on with those comments, I want to say how much I appreciate the Minister’s compassion and her interest in a job that she does extremely well.

We set up this social state to enable those in genuine difficulty to live, and not simply survive in poorness and the like. We determined that it was fair to ask those who could to help others, through tax and national insurance contributions. That has set us apart from many countries. I believe we are here to help the ill and the most vulnerable in society. Those suffering from mental health issues are more in need of our help today than ever before. The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) mentioned staff, and I have staff in my office who work on nothing but benefits—reviews, appeals, applications and advice. They work on those issues full time, to give the correct advice and assistance that it is our job to give as elected representatives. All my other staff are trained and, in fairness, the Government have set up training classes for our staff so that they can be versed in universal credit issues. I thank the Minister for that. We take advantage of it, and make sure our staff are trained.

In the UK, 20.3 million families receive a form of benefit, and 8.7 million of those are pensioners, which is about 30% of the population. For some families, the benefits they receive make up more than half their income. If an individual suffers with a mental health condition that has a long-term effect on their normal day-to-day life, it is considered a disability as defined under the Equality Act 2010. People with mental health conditions are less likely to receive any form of universal credit.

Between October 2013 and October 2016, 193,000 people with mental health conditions were reassessed, and of those 39% were awarded more money. However, 14% were given the same amount, 22% were awarded less money and 25% no longer received the benefits they once had. I say it very gently, but the benefits assessment process needs to be amended, as it is clearly not fitting for those who suffer with serious mental health problems that result in an inability to work. There was a debate in the Chamber on Thursday about mental health first aid in the workplace, with a good level of participation. In Northern Ireland, the legacy of the troubles is a considerably higher frequency of mental health problems than here on the mainland. The figures are extreme: 25% higher than on the mainland. That is the legacy of a 30-year terrorist campaign that affects not just those involved but the families—wives, daughters, sons, mums and dads.

Dr Cameron: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Will he join me in commending the excellent work of psychologists in Northern Ireland who hosted a successful international trauma conference last year that is putting Northern Ireland on the map as a leader in international expertise on trauma?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, and congratulate her on all she does, and on her interest in the issue.

Mental health issues have caused 300,000 people to lose their jobs because they cannot cope with the stress of their career. In Northern Ireland, one in five adults show signs of mental illneses in their lifetime. We can see clearly that more funding needs to go towards helping those who cannot work because of mental health problems. People who cannot hold down a job owing to such problems must be treated with compassion and understanding. I have had several meetings with Capita. As the hon. Member for Glenrothes said, the staff are excellent and work hard. Frances, the manageress of the social security office in Newtownards, is extremely supportive and helpful, as are all the staff when anyone phones about an issue. However, that does not stop the problems that we are having. In my meeting with Capita, I outlined some cases where benefits were withdrawn, but in conjunction with its staff, we were able to overturn the decisions. I was glad that those constituents had
come to see me and my staff, and that we could use medical evidence, supplied by doctors, to persuade Capita of the adverse effect on their mental health, wellbeing and, at times, physical safety. Things must change.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): The point that my hon. Friend is making relates to the fact that some people are so depressed that they do not want to contact anyone who could help them. They fall through the gaps. When people are willing to go forward, we have a high success rate for overturning decisions on appeal, but unfortunately some of the neediest bury their heads in the sand, as they do not have the will or drive to go ahead, or the support behind them.

Jim Shannon: I agree wholeheartedly. What my hon. Friend described is the reason why we are charged, as elected representatives, with delivering our views, in debates such as this and in offices.

People suffering long-term mental health issues should be supported financially because of the challenges that they bring in their career. Those with severe and enduring mental illnesses are exposed to premature mortality of up to 15 to 20 years; the situation affects their health, wellbeing and the length of time they will be in this world. Those people need support. We should not assume their health will improve over time, as it will improve only with rest and coping mechanisms, and the ability to work in a place where there is understanding of the needs of people with mental health issues, and a preparedness to work with them. Such jobs are few and far between. The question is how to achieve that, which is why the debate has been brought forward today.

Changes are needed in society, and I do not think anyone in the House would deny that. However, they must begin with a recognition that mental health issues are not an excuse not to work. They are a tunnel of darkness. What my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) and the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) said about this is very relevant, for each and every one of us here. We are here because we have a passion for our people and want to put that over in the debate.

That tunnel of darkness is brightened only by the light of love and compassion, and I believe that governmental dealings with those in need of help must change in a compassionate way. We ask the Minister to do that, first because we know that she appreciates, understands and has an interest in these issues, and also on behalf of our people, who beseech her to make those changes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. If Front-Bench speakers could limit themselves to nine minutes, that will allow the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) to wind up the debate.

3.30 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Ryan, and I join others in paying tribute to the tour de force that we heard at the beginning of the debate from my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley). She was right to start by mentioning staff members, because one of her staff members—Mary Jane Douglas—is also one of mine, and she contacted me to make sure that I mentioned her name. I also wish to mention other members of the casework team: Dominique Ucbas, Tony McCue and my office manager, the great Roza Salih. They all deal with the benefits and assessment system and have delivered some success. Interestingly, when I interviewed recently for a caseworker, one of the successful candidates I mentioned today, and other candidates, explained how they had helped family members, and others acting on behalf of relatives, who were trying to navigate their way through the benefits process.

The UK Government’s tick-box exercises for disability assessment are woefully inadequate when it comes to mental health conditions. The Work and Pensions Committee, on which I sit, considered a report from last year that contained a damning indictment of the Government’s assessments for the personal independence payment and support allowance. It highlighted that assessments can be emotionally draining for people, and that is doubly awful for those who have mental health conditions. Indeed, such conditions can sometimes be exacerbated by the process and the stress of undergoing an assessment, or by a feeling that the health professional making the assessment is not accurately recording the impact of a condition.

The Government’s follow-up on the report’s criticisms were described by the Committee as “regrettably slow”. One example of their attitude was the contempt that they showed towards people with psychological conditions who require additional support under PIP. As has been said, in 2016 the Government introduced regulations that specifically excluded people with psychological conditions from receiving higher points in their disability assessment for PIP, until the Department was defeated in the courts for what was described as “blatantly discriminatory” legislation. That shows that the Government have absolutely no regard for the impact of psychological conditions, and it completely flies in the face of the commitment made by the Prime Minister on the steps of No. 10 to create parity between physical and mental health conditions. We urgently need a complete overhaul of the PIP and ESA assessment process, to ensure that individuals with mental health conditions are treated with respect and dignity.

A huge amount of evidence from both claimants and stakeholder groups suggests that the system of disability assessment is failing people with mental health conditions. The Committee pointed out that there was an “unprecedented response” from claimants to its inquiry into PIP and ESA assessments. Rethink Mental Illness has said that many assessors do not have the necessary expertise in mental health conditions to carry out assessments, and that is exacerbated by the fact that ESA and PIP assessments are not designed to take account of the full impact of someone’s condition on their day-to-day life.

Mencap is “concerned that assessors often do not have a full understanding of learning disability as exemplified in the stories we hear from individuals and their families.”

Mind and the Scottish Association for Mental Health have said that they hear
“frequently from people with mental health problems who have been assessed by healthcare professionals who lack a basic understanding of mental health. Often in these cases the problem is not that assessors lack specific clinical knowledge, but that they do not have good understanding of what it’s like to have a mental health problem or do not ask sensitive questions about how someone’s mental health affects them.”

That point came across clearly in the inquiry. We asked the contractors Atos and Capita how many qualified doctors they had in their organisations to carry out assessments. Atos said that it had two, as did Capita, and they described the rest of their assessors as “occupational health practitioners”.

I remember specifically asking a senior figure from Atos—this became one of those videos that are widely shared within minutes on social media—who someone with multiple sclerosis and depression would see in their organisation, and I was advised that they would see an occupational health practitioner. When I asked that senior figure whether he understood why people are cynical about the process, he nodded his head.

One recommendation in the Committee’s report was for audio and visual recording, because around 80% of successful appeals are based on verbal information that was provided at the original assessment. Will the Minister update Members on that recommendation?

David Linden: My hon. Friend is spot on. Does he, like me, believe that this issue is such a problem partly because it has been contracted out to private companies that cut corners in all ways, meaning that our constituents get such a bad service? It comes down to the issue of privatisation; that is why the service is so poor.

Chris Stephens: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. My next question to the Minister is about acceptable reports. The contractors have never hit Government targets for acceptable reports. If any other contractor were to conduct its business in such a way and failed to meet Government targets, it would no longer have its contract. How are the contractors now performing with regards to acceptable reports?

Will the Minister explain the mandatory reconsideration process, and confirm the rule that eight out of 10 mandatory reconsiderations—80% of them—should result in failure? That instruction was given to staff. I think the Government said it was guidance, but some of us believe it was an instruction. Will the Minister say whether it has been rescinded, so that mandatory reconsiderations can be dealt with in a fairer way? Will she provide statistics on the number of successful appeals made by those with mental health conditions? I recently wrote to her about people who are blind or have a visual impairment, as that issue has had some press scrutiny in Scotland, but can she provide similar figures for individuals with mental health conditions?

The removal of implied consent under universal credit will have a particularly detrimental impact on those with psychological disorders or learning difficulties, the ability to rely on implied consent was important. The stress and pressure of having to interact with the benefits system and provide explicit consent is a real concern, as it may force claimants to jump through new hoops to get support in making their claim or resolving any problems with it.

I will conclude with the Scottish Government’s approach to the social security system. The Scottish Government will have some devolved power over the PIP process, and they are building the necessary infrastructure to deliver that. Disability benefit assessments will be carried out not by the private sector, but by Scotland’s public sector healthcare professionals. The approach taken by the Scottish Government will mean that the system is evidence-based and uses healthcare professionals, and that important step has been welcomed by many third-sector organisations in Scotland. It is vital to put the needs of the individual at the centre of the social security system by providing choice, flexibility and control. I thank you, Ms Ryan, and I look forward to the Minister’s response.

3.39 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan.

I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing this debate and on making a truly powerful speech, in which she shared some of the evidence that she has received as a result of the call she put out for accounts of people’s harrowing experiences of their mental distress and of accessing the social security system. She highlighted that it was actually down to a number of voluntary sector organisations—charities and other bodies—to help those individuals through the claim process, and many of those organisations rely on funding they receive from the European Union.

The hon. Lady said that what is lacking in the whole process is adequate training of the healthcare professionals involved. It is vital that they be trained adequately. We know that there are meant to be mental distress champions, but ultimately their influence is not being felt by those going through the assessment.

Many Members, in speeches or interventions, spoke about the appeals process. It is recognised that there is concern about it, as there is such a high success rate for appeals, which I will come to later.

The hon. Lady absolutely hit the nail on the head when she talked about the change from the disability living allowance to the personal independent payment, and the impact that change has had on so many claimants. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) highlighted in an intervention the report published today by York University, which shows that people with psychological conditions were 2.4 times more likely than claimants without such a condition to have their DLA award stopped when they were being assessed for PIP, so there is clearly a problem. Many people assume that the policy intention behind PIP was to reduce the number of people in receipt of such support. There should be parity of esteem for those in better health and those with mental health conditions, because PIP is there to contribute towards the extra costs of living with such an illness or condition.
We know that disabled people, particularly those who experience mental distress, have been let down by the assessment framework. Many people would say that the framework is innately flawed. As of May 2017, half of those claiming ESA and a third of those claiming PIP were described as having “mental or behavioural disorders”.

The Department for Work and Pensions has spent more than £1 billion on outsourcing the assessments for these benefits to providers such as Capita and Atos. However, those providers are falling woefully short of the DWP’s own performance standards. More than half of the assessment reports by Capita have been graded as unacceptable, so we know that there are clear problems with the way that the assessment framework is being used by these providers, which has obviously had a great impact on those experiencing mental distress.

Many Members have today shared—as Members have done constantly throughout their time in Parliament—the heart-wrenching accounts of constituents whose assessment left them in deep despair and distress. If anyone has not heard such accounts, they should think back to February last year, when the Work and Pensions Committee received an unprecedented amount of evidence from individuals sharing their experiences of the PIP and ESA assessment and framework, and of the distress that they caused them.

There have even been reports of people who have admitted being suicidal being asked why they had not killed themselves yet. Like the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton, I do not know how an assessor could ask somebody that. I would like to think that the Minister will ensure that that does not happen again; it really should not.

There have been reports of assessors overlooking someone’s mental distress, and asking inappropriate and offensive questions. I will give just one example. An individual diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, depression and anxiety lost his job and had a mental-health breakdown, so he applied for PIP twice, but was turned down twice. Obviously, the process began with his filling out the claim form, collecting all the medical evidence requested of him, and finally having to endure the humiliating face-to-face assessment. The process of trying to claim PIP caused that individual—David—great anxiety. He spiralled out of control into self-harm, and eventually overdosed on drugs.

No assessment for essential social security support should lead to anyone spiralling toward self-harm. The Minister will agree that we have to consider whether it is right for the burden of providing medical evidence to fall on the claimant. Will she commit to removing the burden of collecting medical evidence from the person claiming PIP and ESA?

When David went to a tribunal, he was awarded PIP, based on the same evidence that the DWP had previously deemed insufficient. However, we know that David’s story is not a one-off; it is all too common. Since 2013, 71% of PIP decisions have been overturned on appeal, which is a clear indication that there is inaccuracy and poor decision making in the assessment process. Denying more than 100,000 disabled people PIP will obviously have a negative impact on whether people can go on and live independently. The DWP spent over £100 million in administering reviews and appeals between 2016 and 2018. Much of the evidence would have been “inadmissible” in a normal court of law; that was said by a senior judge.

The Minister must consider all recommendations, particularly those of the Social Security Advisory Committee around mandatory reconsiderations, decision making, and ensuring that assessments are recorded. The High Court last year ruled that the negative changes regarding those who experience psychological distress were unlawfully discriminatory. Obviously, that has led to the review of 1.6 million PIP awards.

When does the Minister anticipate that the reviews of the system will be completed, and has a timetable for them been published, so we can see that they are completed? It will be important to know that all those people have got their back payment in a timely fashion.

The DWP is undergoing seven reviews of disabled people who are wrongly being deprived of social security. Five of those reviews are of flawed PIP and ESA assessments. So it is really important that the DWP gets this right. The failings of the assessment framework go way beyond discrimination; they contribute to, or even cause, individuals’ mental distress. In the words of one person, “Going through the WCA process is the biggest source of worry in my life”.

That is how we are treating some of our most vulnerable people in society.

Labour recognises that there needs to be a radical overhaul of the assessment framework. It was labelled “superficial” and “dismissive” by the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty. It should be replaced by a holistic, personalised and tailored single assessment, which would treat all disabled people, whether they have a physical or mental health condition, with the dignity and respect that they so desperately deserve.

3.48 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan.

I begin by my adding my praise to that of other Members for the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), both for securing this debate and for the way in which she addressed the House. She and others are absolutely right: I am utterly determined to make sure that we improve the system by which we assess people for employment and support allowance, the personal independence payment and of course universal credit. I am just as ambitious as everybody else in the room to ensure that we treat everyone in society with respect and dignity, and really promote their human rights.

On independent assessments, people who go on this journey—I do not want to call them claimants or customers; that was a good point well made by the hon. Lady—through the system give the approach that we publish and is open to scrutiny. One poor experience is one too many. We are utterly determined to improve the experience at every stage of the journey, and really put the person at the centre.
PIP was introduced to ensure that mental and physical health conditions have parity of esteem. Many more people are benefiting from it than ever did from disability living allowance, and are getting the higher rates of support, for both their daily living and their mobility. Broadly, therefore, it is working, but as we have heard, there are some absolutely horrendous and terrible cases of unacceptable behaviour, where things are going wrong. I thank all hon. Members who have come along today. It is clear that everyone here wants to do the best they can for their people and to work with me to absolutely get this right, and I welcome that.

I want to answer questions, but I have been given very little time to respond; that is the nature of these debates. As always, I will write to hon. Members on any questions that I do not have time to address. I start with the invaluable work of the Work and Pensions Committee. It is great to have one of its members here speaking up for that. The Committee gathered a huge amount of evidence, and I looked through all the research findings and the Committee’s recommendations thoroughly. We have agreed to implement all those recommendations, and we are carefully working our way through every single one of them. I want to reassure hon. Members that I work very closely with SSAC. It is an invaluable body. Everyone in the Department always thoroughly considers its reports and recommendations, and whenever possible we seek to implement them.

A few hon. Members mentioned video recording, which, when I came from the Home Office to take up this position, I thought was a really good idea. One of the fundamental problems we face with people claiming benefits is a lack of trust. Unfortunately, too many people are worried. We have today heard eloquent contributions about people being really worried about having to go through the process. In spite of the fact that most people have a really good experience, most of them are worried before they enter the process. I obviously want to eliminate that, as does everyone in the Department.

I want people to fill in the forms confidently, and pick up the phone or go into their jobcentre thinking, “There will be compassionate people who will help me”. That is what we are all striving to achieve. I believe that video recording the assessments will play an incredibly important role in regaining people’s trust in the whole process. Hon. Members will know that audio recordings are already available, but they are not done with the most up-to-date equipment. It can be a clunky and difficult experience, and I want to make it as easy as possible.

Throughout the summer we did a lot of work both with people who are claiming benefits and with healthcare professionals. All assessments are undertaken by fully qualified healthcare professionals. They are mostly nurses, but they all have experience and they have additional training in how to undertake the functional assessments. They are highly motivated and trained individuals, and it was important to consider how they felt about the video recording, just as much as how people coming into be assessed felt about it. Having taken all that into consideration, we have started a pilot, which is going well. It is voluntary, because we wanted to ensure that people felt really confident about having their assessments videoed.

The strength of the pilot will be that lots of people take up the opportunity. There is no point coming up with a videocasting possibility if people are not prepared to say, “Yes, I would like my assessment to be videoed”. We have been working carefully on the pilot and will review the findings to see how and when we can roll the initiative out. There is an absolute determination and commitment to doing that, because it will build the trust and confidence in the system that we want.

We have also been looking at every single stage of the process. I really want to assure hon. Members that I regularly meet our stakeholders—the large charities and disability rights organisations. We have a PIP forum and a stakeholder team working with us on improvements to the work capability assessment, and disabled people are really getting alongside us and working with us on improving the process. I have already commissioned an independent review of the PIP application process. We have been looking carefully and in detail at every single part of the claimant journey—the person’s journey—through the system to see what more we can do, right through to how we can improve our mandatory reconsideration process. At the same time, as I said, we have been implementing the very helpful findings of the Work and Pensions Committee.

Going back to comments about what happens in the assessment, we will make a decision based just on the application, without sending someone to a face-to-face assessment, if we can gather enough information from the person applying for the benefit, and if they provide information from healthcare professionals, whether they be consultants, GPs or community mental health nurses. We will use that information whenever possible. A lot of our work over the summer was engaging with healthcare professionals to try to understand the barriers to their providing us with information. Relatively small numbers of people go to appeal, and relatively small numbers have decisions overturned. Most often, decisions are overturned because more information has become available by the time of the appeal. I am determined to see what we can do to have the information provided up front by healthcare professionals, so that we can make more paper-based assessments, without the need for face-to-face ones.

Hon. Members will know that we have introduced a set of new criteria called the severe conditions criteria, for employment and support allowance and now for PIP. If people have severe mental or physical health conditions that, sadly, are not going to improve, we put them into a category where they do not have to be reassessed, apart from a very light-touch reassessment after 10 years, just to ensure that their circumstances have not changed. That means that fewer people will be reassessed, and I hope that everyone here can commend that.

On some of the other observations on face-to-face assessments, we have had quite a discussion about the mental health questions. The questions that the assessors use and the training they receive is all approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. I think hon. Members were referring to the mental state examination questions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who has left the room and is a doctor, said, this is the best practice of the medical profession. It is really important that the Department takes its duty of care very seriously—and we do. Right through from our job coaches in Jobcentres Plus to people in our telephony services, we have a really good process to ensure that
anyone expressing suicidal thoughts is supported. For example, everyone in our jobcentres is going through mental health training to ensure that they feel able to chat to someone with suicidal ideation and keep them safe and in front of them while their colleagues secure additional support from the NHS. We take that extremely seriously and are led by the best evidence—

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I have so few minutes and so many questions to answer.

I want to reassure hon. Members that our work in this area is led by the best possible clinical input. The deputy chief medical officer, Professor Doctor Gina Radford, oversees all this work, because keeping people safe is just as important as treating everyone with respect and dignity and ensuring that their human rights are upheld.

I will conclude, so that I can give the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East a few moments to wind up. I am absolutely determined to carry on our work on fibromyalgia and on all the issues she has mentioned. I have invited people into the Department for weekly meetings, so that together we can make the changes we want to see.

3.59 pm

Angela Crawley: I thank the Minister for her kind and compassionate words. It always comes across as if she genuinely cares, and I believe she does, but what I say to her is this: do not be another Minister who passes through the Department and does not address these problems. They need to be dealt with. It is fine saying that on paper the stats look good and people are fine with them, but if one person goes through the process and does not get the support they need, it can be life-changing or life-ending for them, and I want to see that it is life-changing, not life-ending.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered mental health and the benefits assessment process.

Grassroots Football Funding: Wembley Stadium

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. Would those who are inexplicably not staying for the next debate about Wembley Stadium please be courteous enough to leave quickly and quietly?

4 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of Wembley Stadium and the funding of grass roots football.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Football, as we know, is our national sport. We invented the modern game and have the most popular league in the world, viewed by millions around the globe. I grew up playing and watching the game, and while I still play and watch when I can, I also have an interest in ensuring that our national sport can be enjoyed and participated in by as many people as possible at all levels.

Members will recall last year’s controversial proposals to sell Wembley Stadium to the American businessman, Shahid Khan. At the time, the Prime Minister rather dismissively told me that the proposed sale was a private matter. I have to say that I consider the sale of the national football team’s stadium—the home of the FA cup final and countless other important matches—to be a matter of some considerable public interest.

The deal did not go through in the end, but we need to talk about the consequences. The sale falling through has left a hole where the grassroots strategy was. The main justification put forward by the Football Association for the deal was that it would have enabled the release of hundreds of millions of pounds to fund grassroots football. Although I was a little bit sceptical about the deal and what it would mean in the long term, because sale and lease-back agreements often do not work well in the long run, it was beyond doubt that it would have enabled significant investment in grassroots football. It is important for us to discuss how to replace that funding.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): One of the greatest footballers who ever graced the football field in this world, certainly in my lifetime, was George Best. Pelé, another of the greatest footballers in the world, said that his favourite footballer was George Best. Geordie Best was a product of local academies, played his football in the back streets of Belfast and became a world star. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those are the sort of people we want to encourage?

Justin Madders: As a Manchester United fan, I would say that, if we can encourage more George Bests, I will certainly be very pleased to see that. I will talk a little more about how we can encourage more youngsters to participate a little later.

Football in this country is in a very strong position. The premier league is the envy of the world. Most of the world’s top players come here, and England’s youth
teams have enjoyed unprecedented levels of success in recent years. Whether those kids who have enjoyed great success with the national team recently get to play at the highest level remains to be seen. We should be concerned about the declining number of home-grown players, such as George Best, coming through the leagues, although I am sure someone with that talent would still make it today.

About 35% of players who started games in the premier league last season were English, on average. That represented a huge reduction on the 69% of English players who started games in the inaugural season of the premier league in 1992-93. There are huge questions about how professional clubs operate and about how our younger players can hope to get a chance against the huge influx of imported superstars, and I also sometimes wonder about the effect of giving a 17-year-old who has never played for the first team 10 grand a week—what does that do to their chances?—but that is probably outside the scope of today’s debate.

What we can do today is discuss how to improve the game below elite level. One in six grassroots matches were cancelled last year, and I recall my own kid’s games getting repeatedly cancelled over the winter period, although I do not think it was a particularly extraordinarily bad winter. Cancellations have a detrimental effect on both an individual’s and a team’s development, and we need to encourage that development. There are of course plenty of distractions and reasons why kids may find something else to do rather than play football, but we should do what we can to support it by encouraging a little bit more of the wealth that flows through the game to trickle down to the grassroots. We cannot expect the superstars of tomorrow to emerge if we are not prepared to invest in them.

One thing we can and, in my view, must do is improve the standard of facilities for younger players of all abilities, and for everyone involved in grassroots football. We should not tolerate second-rate facilities in our national sport. We know the pressure local authorities are under to balance the books and how there is little left for discretionary spending on improving sporting facilities. Pitches are often in poor condition, with poor drainage and areas of the pitch that are more mud than grass. Many pitches have little or no changing facilities connected with them.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a wonderful case for grassroots football. A club in my constituency, Otley Town, wrote to me to outline its concerns about facilities. It said:

“The key issue that we have is the quality of training facilities in winter. Most junior and senior clubs need access to all weather pitches so they have good environments to train in.”

They went on to talk about the need for funding for girls football, veterans football and disability football, to ensure that everyone can enjoy the game. Should we not ensure that the money trickles down from the millionaire owners to the grassroots?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A whole range of groups are participating in football that possibly traditionally did not, and we need to encourage them as well.

I am not saying that there is no investment. Since 2000, the Football Foundation, funded by the FA, the Premier League and Sport England, has invested more than £600 million in projects. My constituency has recently benefited from such investment, with fantastic facilities at the Vauxhall Sports and Social Club, where two new fourth generation pitches, which I occasionally grace, have been opened alongside a fantastic new clubhouse. About half the money for that came from the Premier League and the FA facilities fund, but the other half had to be raised locally, and I pay tribute to the incredible work done by Dave Edmunds and Tony Woodley, in particular, who really fought to get those facilities off the ground.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): We see hundreds of grass pitches close each year because of cuts. Although the football world does its bit to invest in the grassroots, more could always be done, especially given the billion-pound TV deals. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need the Government to get tough if we are to see any action?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is right. As the shadow Sports Minister, she will know far more about the challenges than I do. When we compare our facilities with other countries, we are lagging behind. We have half the number of third generation pitches that Germany has and, shockingly, only one in three grass pitches are of adequate quality. Some 5 million playing opportunities were lost last year because of inadequate facilities. With the NHS struggling, schools facing a funding crisis, and the challenge of affordable housing, it is fair to say that we cannot expect the taxpayer to find the resources for this. However, as my hon. Friend said, there are huge opportunities for the grassroots in terms of the cash that is washing around the game.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): There are some really good examples. The Sheffield junior football league is the largest junior football league in Europe. The Isobel Bowler Sports Ground in my constituency is part of the Parklife project, funded by the FA and the Football Foundation. It has a great artificial pitch and a wonderful gym, where Disability Awareness with Sport runs facilities for disabled people. That is all wonderful and very positive—as is Mosborough rugby football club, where the Rugby Football Union has come in with support—but let us contrast the £300 million that local authorities spend on pitches in parks with the more than £200 million that the premier league’s clubs spent on agents’ fees alone in the last financial year. Is that not a contrast that we simply should not accept?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and for his excellent work with the parliamentary football club and with the Football Foundation. He is absolutely right about the cost: £200 million on agents’ fees, more than £1 billion in transfer fees every year now, and the direction of travel is only upwards. I know a levy operates at the moment on transfer fees, but a significant amount of that goes to players’ pensions and academies. There is nothing wrong with that, but that is for the professional side of the game and we are talking about the grassroots. I believe a small levy or a redistribution of existing funds could do an awful lot more for grassroots football.
Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): My constituency benefited recently from half a million pounds from the Football Foundation for new training facilities at Mansfield Town, which will be a huge benefit for the constituency. The hon. Gentleman is talking about the money involved in football. Obviously, the success of the premier league drives up wages and prices in that market, but premier league clubs and players pay something in the region of £3.5 billion a year in tax to the Chancellor, and there is even more tax revenue as we filter down through the Football League. I am interested in whether the hon. Gentleman thinks there is an opportunity there to even more tax revenue as we filter down through the premier league clubs and players pay something in the region of £3.5 billion a year in tax to the Chancellor, and there is even more tax revenue as we filter down through the Football League. I am interested in whether the hon. Gentleman thinks there is an opportunity there to ring-fence some of that money to be reinvested back in the grassroots of the game.

Justin Madders: That is an interesting point. Of course, we can debate ring-fenced taxes all day—there have been discussions about that in the context of the NHS, for example—but I think we can divert some of the other money, particularly agents’ fees. I go back to what my hon. Friend said about that, because I believe that people in that arena, particularly agents, are getting an awful lot of money from football for very little effort.

I do not want to turn this speech into a tirade against agents, but Mino Raiola is reported to have earned—using the word “earned” in the loosest possible sense—about £20 million when Paul Pogba transferred to Manchester United. That is £20 million for advising on one transfer; that is money that is going out of the game, and we need to look at getting some of it back. In a week? Should we not be tapping deeper into the billions of pounds that come in as a result of television deals before football clubs get hold of that money?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. That is one of a number of ways in which we can harness the wealth that is in the game to better effect, and as I say, that is something I encourage Government to look at closely.

While we are here, I will say a few words about the future of Wembley. Obviously, the proposed sale split public opinion, and I, like many others, had concerns. I do not know whether another offer will come along, but I understand that the Government will have a say over whether any sale goes ahead, so if that does come to pass, I ask the Government first to consider what we have discussed today about harnessing that money.

Secondly, I ask the Government to consider whether safeguards could be put in place so that important domestic and international games always take precedence at that stadium; what measures we could put in place to meet the needs of fans, in terms of kick-off times and the availability and price of tickets; and what assurance there would be that any future purchaser beyond the initial one could be held to any agreements that were made on initial sale with the FA. As I say, we are not in that place now, but I would be interested to hear the Minister’s thoughts on that.

Finally, I will take this opportunity to say a few words about the love of the game that means that millions of people up and down the country get to participate, and their dedication gives youngsters opportunities to emulate their heroes. They often have to do so while getting changed in car parks in the freezing cold, facing frequent cancellations and bobbly pitches that are mud baths, so it is not surprising that kids sometimes prefer to spend their time playing football on the Xbox, rather than in real life. We all know about the need to encourage healthy living and exercise, and we all know about the many distractions between, so we need to make the playing experience as enjoyable as possible. There are probably not many pastimes that bring as much pleasure as scoring the winning goal in the last minute of an important game, but we know those occasions are few and far between, so we need to make sure that when kids play, they are encouraged; they are comfortable; and most of all, they enjoy themselves.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; that is what I was trying to convey. There are lots of agencies involved, there is lots of money there, and Government need to guide, advise and maybe even compel those organisations to do more to help the grassroots. There is also the issue of prize money, which totals £2.5 billion; even a fraction of that amount could be put into grassroots football. I passionately believe that a modest level of redistribution would not destroy the premier league’s allure, but it might just enable the millions of people who enjoy playing our national sport to do so in slightly better conditions.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I am grateful; my hon. Friend is very prescient and ahead of the game. One of the issues that has come up again and again is the difficulty posed by the multiplicity of agencies involved in football: we have the Premier League, the Football Association, the Football League and others. Does my hon. Friend agree that a levy is a tool to get those organisations to work together and come up with results, encouraging our young people to play more football on decent surfaces?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; that is what I was trying to convey. There are lots of agencies involved, there is lots of money there, and Government need to guide, advise and maybe even compel those organisations to do more to help the grassroots. There is also the issue of prize money, which totals £2.5 billion; even a fraction of that amount could be put into grassroots football. I passionately believe that a modest level of redistribution would not destroy the premier league’s allure, but it might just enable the millions of people who enjoy playing our national sport to do so in slightly better conditions.

Sir David Crausby (Bolton North East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend accept that there is lots of money in the game of football, with footballers on as much as £500,000 a week? Should we not be tapping deeper into the billions of pounds that come in as a result of television deals before football clubs get hold of that money?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. That is one of a number of ways in which we can harness the wealth that is in the game to better effect, and as I say, that is something I encourage Government to look at closely.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) rose

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4.30. The hon. Member is standing.
Mike Wood: Sorry, I had understood that it was a 60-minute debate. I will sit down.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Thank you. We now move on to the very sporty Sports Minister for her to respond.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for securing this debate and for his insightful contributions, and to other Members for the points they have made.

Mike Wood: I am happy to be interrupted by my hon. Friend if he has something equally as insightful to say, which I am sure he does.

Mike Wood: I thank the Minister for giving way. I would not claim to be particularly insightful, but I know how much Ministers enjoy being urged to enter into negotiations with Treasury colleagues. Will she urge them to look at the UK guarantee scheme and how it relates to educational facilities, and whether that could be used to provide financial guarantees for bodies wishing to invest in community sports facilities?

Mims Davies: I am happy to be interrupted by my hon. Friend for that point. As we head towards the spending review, our Department is consistently urged to hold conversations with the Treasury.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston raised issues relating to volunteers. I echo his love for the game. People in our communities give so much to the grassroots, and that should be encouraged because of what it gives to our children and to the game as a whole. My father-in-law did exactly that as a football referee in Wales for many years, and he also organised games for homeless youngsters. It is important that we recognise the volunteering that takes place up and down the country. It is absolutely vital. Football is not just a business; it has a responsibility to the grassroots, as we all do.

I absolutely hear the message regarding the safeguards for Wembley ticket pricing, future purchase and controls. I will come on to some of those issues further into my speech, but as we heard earlier Wembley is iconic in terms of what it means to football and to us as the public. It is important that we have a national stadium that is able to host the biggest sporting events; Wembley has delivered that over many years, and we want it to continue to do so. UEFA’s decision to hold seven matches, including the semi-finals and finals of next year’s European championship, is proof that Wembley remains a top-class venue, hosting some of the world’s biggest and most important sporting events. If we are to bid for any future major sporting tournaments—Members might know what I am alluding to—we will need to make sure that we have the right stadium for World cup finals, one that resonates with the rest of the world. That is essential.

Last year, when the FA said that it was considering selling Wembley Stadium as a means of generating extra funds to re-invest in the grassroots, the Government were, naturally and rightly, keen to listen. Nobody would argue that a sport with more than 2 million regular participants could fail to be further helped by the promise of such additional funding. However, at the same time we recognised that Wembley has a special place in the heart of football fans. When listening to the proposal, the Government’s prime consideration as a public funder of the stadium was to protect the public interest, as is absolutely right. Going back to the hon. Gentleman’s point, custodianship of it would be absolutely important in any future new arrangement, no matter who owned Wembley stadium. The stadium should always be protected for future needs. The fact that the FA executive was considering the sale of its most prized asset raised more than a few eyebrows. In its response, the executive was clear in its view that the sale would free up funds to help provide greater financial support, which it felt was needed to help the sport from the bottom up.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response to the debate secured by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Does she not feel, as some of us do, that we should not sell our national stadium and that it should be retained because of its importance? What we could do—I believe the hon. Gentleman referred to this—is take a revenue from transfer fees. That would create some money that could then be used for the grassroots football we want to see. There are ways of achieving things without having to sell the national jewels.

Mims Davies: I absolutely see the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. Ultimately, we have a stake in the matter and we will very much be keeping it on the radar. We are not in the place he suggests at the moment, but I will continue to make the case I have made so far in my speech. Whatever the FA does, we have a stake in ensuring that it is absolutely right for football as a whole.

We have heard some of the headline statistics. Only one in three grass pitches is of adequate quality and one in six matches is, sadly, called off due to pitch quality. England has only half as many 3G pitches as Germany. Where there is an opportunity to see more coming into the game, it is absolutely right to take it. We should look at the active lives survey and recognise that what has been cancelled this season may impact on the opportunities our youngsters have to participate. The statistics are a harsh reminder that, despite the unrivalled success of our domestic football at the elite level—we cannot forget the premier league, which is the wealthiest and most globally popular league—there is still a way to go in ensuring that we replicate that consistent success in what we provide at the grassroots level. We must and will provide playing opportunities across our towns and cities so that current and future generations can enjoy football.

Ben Bradley: I am sorry to interrupt the Minister. I recognise that the job of Sports Minister often tends to be to drag different Departments together to manage things more effectively and to find funding. Can more be done within her brief to bring together such bodies as Sport England with governing bodies? Sport England’s remit these days is more focused on grassroots activity and the community. Are there opportunities not only to invest in football, but to work with Sport England to invest in brilliant community facilities, too?
Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. In asking me to do this role, the Prime Minister—

[Interruption.]

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am so sorry to interrupt the Minister, but a Division has been called in the House. I understand that there may be more than one. If there is one, we will return in 15 minutes. If there is more than one, we will return 10 minutes after the last Division is called.

4.22 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

5.33 pm

On resuming—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The sitting is resumed. The finish time will be 5.41 pm and the Minister has eight minutes left.

Mims Davies: As I was saying, before we were interrupted to do our absolute duty, we must and we will provide playing opportunities, to be enjoyed by people now and by future generations, across our towns and cities. I want clarity for grassroots football and balanced provision of local assets, as well as a good pathway for our next generation of stars.

The figures appear to suggest that the grassroots are somewhat underfunded compared with the investment going into professional clubs, but the professional game rightly cares about the grassroots, as demonstrated by the funding it provides. As the Minister for Sport, however, I will always champion the grassroots and focus on them, examining the commitment given to them and providing challenge.

The Premier League is investing £100 million each year into football participation programmes and local facilities. That is a significant amount and is in addition to the other areas that it funds and supports in football, at all levels of the game, including vital payments to the English Football League and national league clubs.

Justin Madders: I am grateful to the Minister for picking up so well from where she left off, all that time ago. The central thrust of what I was saying, which I think most Members agree with, is that we do not dispute that the professional game puts money into the grassroots, but we think there ought to be a little more. Does the Minister agree with that analysis?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for raising that important point: we must absolutely keep a focus on the grassroots. In Parliament today there has been constituency-wide MP engagement with the Premier League. He mentioned the existing levy of 4% on Premier League clubs and the fact that the money goes to all tiers of the game, supporting welfare and pensions.

Grassroots will always be an absolute focus for my Department and me, so those partnerships with clubs and that commitment to all the broader activities that address health, education, crime and other difficult social issues that football, alongside Government Departments, can reach, are vital. Those programmes add value and must be seen in conjunction with the grassroots opportunities, to ensure that we continue to champion the sport and that we consider the facilities and the wider community value of football.

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The league funds also provide a voice for fans and help to fund new stadiums, which we enjoy visiting from time to time—or, hopefully, regularly—and which, as I mentioned, will perhaps help to bring back the World cup to these shores. The FA is not far behind in investing in the way that we would hope, with £70 million going into the grassroots cause, and I will continue to work closely with it, engaging with the new FA management in a time of change but also, I think, of opportunity. The Government will not be shy, either. We recognise the need to continue to support the national game. We are currently investing £25 million each year, including £18 million for facilities, £2 million for grassroots coaches and £5 million for the FA’s participation programmes, which provide vital support for the women’s game and disability football.

This Government, in partnership with the FA and the Premier League, are investing more money than ever before into the grassroots football programmes and facilities. From this year, we will contribute a combined £70 million to provide new and improved facilities through the Football Foundation charity, which we heard about earlier. Since 2000, the partnership has invested about £615 million through the foundation, which has resulted in 700 new and improved 3G pitches, 3,500 grass pitches and 1,000 new and improved changing rooms. I acknowledge that we must continue that work—there is more to be done—but simply throwing money at a problem is not always the answer. We must ensure that investment continues to go into the right areas and that we are having the right local and necessary impacts.

How are we doing that? We are working with our partner, Sport England, which is working on behalf of the Government to create new local football facility plans for every local authority in England. Over the next 12 months, we will know exactly the best places to invest in football on a supply and demand basis. That will include further artificial and grass pitches, school mini pitches and Parklife hubs—a new programme aimed at developing a sustainable model for supporting local football facilities. Some hon. Members may have visited the hub sites in Sheffield and London, with state-of-the-art artificial grass pitches available to people of all ages and abilities. We hope to deliver increases in football participation in every city. New hubs are on the horizon: hubs in Liverpool and, close to my constituency, in Southampton will open this year, with further cities in the pipeline.

The new local football plans will align with the new national football strategy, working together to ensure that we take stock of the facilities over the next 10 years and get closer to the number of facilities that I think we would all like to see. We must ensure that the Football Foundation is the right delivery model, that we have the right mechanisms and that there is sufficient capacity in place to deliver the increase in local investment. We must recognise that there is ongoing and increased demand for local facilities, so we need those local football plans.

Although the proceeds from a Wembley sale would have no doubt accelerated investment into facilities, we are not simply standing still on this issue, despite the challenges to that potential deal. Shortly, I will shortly meet the EFL, the FA and the Premier League, looking to them to reaffirm their commitment to working with Government to significantly improve the provision and
quality of football facilities, and focusing on participation levels across all demographics. I will also discuss with them whether the levels of investment are sufficient to meet the expected demand, and to address some of those statistics I mentioned earlier. I will ask key questions about what needs to be done and where it will be done. I will be there to champion the grassroots.

I am alive to the fact that there are other issues of concern in football, and I fully intend to work with the sport to address them. Only last week, I responded to a debate about the alarming problems with the ownership of Coventry City. We need to address the other side of football, and I will work with the authorities to do that. The so-called fans who cause discrimination incidents continue to make the headlines. We do not want football to return to its worst days. I will discuss that and ensure that the football authorities and all relevant stakeholders know that further decisive action can and must be taken.

Time is against me, so let me summarise. This has been a very useful debate. I reaffirm the Government's commitment to strengthening grassroots football. It is absolutely right that the continued commercial success of elite football is reflected in the support it gives all levels of football, and I will champion that. I do not want grassroots football to continue to be seen as a poor relation, and I will work with the football authorities and all stakeholders in the coming weeks.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

5.41 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered freehold estate fees.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. The residents of Hazelbank in Canney Hill in my constituency first brought this issue to my attention. I am grateful to them and to homeowners in the Burton Woods, Durham Gate, Grangefields, Merrington Park, Middridge Vale and Moorcroft developments who have shared their experiences with me. I also thank Cathy Priestley and Halima Ali from the national Homeowners Rights Network—HorNet—campaign group.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and north-east colleague on securing this important debate and on her Freehold Properties (Management Charges and Shared Facilities) Bill, which I am pleased to co-sponsor. I am also pleased to add my thanks for the work of my Great Park constituent Cathy Priestley, whom my hon. Friend rightly mentions. I commend Cathy, who has worked tirelessly to raise awareness of these issues. Does my hon. Friend agree with me and Cathy that one of the key concerns for private homeowners in such developments is the sheer lack of transparency about what they are paying for?

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The lack of transparency is a significant problem across the country. I did a survey, which I thought would be for people in Bishop Auckland, but I got responses from Ulster to Plymouth, which shows what a massive problem this is.

If offered the choice between a leasehold property and a freehold property, most prospective homebuyers would opt for freehold. Who would not want the permanent and absolute tenure of their property, with all the freedom and security that promises? However, the large property developers—Barratt, Bellway, Persimmon and Taylor Wimpey—sell properties that are not free from hold but come with financial obligations and restrictive covenants administered by property management companies such as Greenbelt, Gateway, FirstPort and Trinity Estates, which take ownership of communal spaces once the developer has moved off the site.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. She mentioned Greenbelt. I have a problem in my constituency that goes back 16 years, when a group of people purchased houses from Bellway. The adjoining land is administered by Greenbelt. Since then, those people have paid fees every year for the very basic administration of that land, but the company has failed to take the remedial measures necessary to prevent the area from becoming a centre for antisocial behaviour. The residents have complained; one went to court but lost their case. Does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to be more transparency when freeholders buy their property from developers? Secondly, does there need to be a cheap adjudication system to ensure that the balance of interest between the freeholders and the companies is far more even than it is at the moment?
Helen Goodman: Yes, of course. There needs to be more transparency and a system of redress, as my hon. Friend says. There also need to be some rules of the game about the standard to which the estates are built in the first instance. The management companies charge residents an inflated annual fee—in exchange, apparently, for tending to grassy areas, shrubs and other facilities on the estate. That is on top of their council tax.

This is a scandal. There has clearly been mis-selling. The public perception of freehold is deliberately exploited by the property companies in their sales materials. Many homebuyers are not made aware of the arrangements for the management of open spaces until the completion of the sale. One of my constituents reported that the first they had heard of their management company, which was Greenbelt, was a threatening late payment letter. They had not received a bill, let alone a welcome pack.

There is no room in the glossy brochure for an outline of the legal arrangements, but there always seems to be plenty of space for images of parks, playgrounds and woodland areas, backed up by verbal assurances from the sales rep that they are planned for the estate. Those promises are then broken and the land is passed or sold on to the maintenance company.

For example, at DurhamGate, a large housing development in Spennymoor in my constituency, the plans promised a “green spine” running through the centre of the site. Several years in, and with the site still under construction, residents are being hit with a full-price fee of £120 a year. Another of my constituents reported receiving a maintenance bill for a parking area that did not exist. The fees charged to residents for the maintenance of their estates are high, rising, uncapped and completely unregulated.

In Bishop Auckland, the annual fee for each household is somewhere between £100 and £200 a year, depending on the site. At first that does not sound too onerous, but when we consider that 278 neighbours on the estate are also paying the fee, it is obviously a grossly excessive £30,000 just for mowing some grass. In other parts of the country, in line with higher house prices, fees can be up to £400 or £600; I have even heard of fees of £800 a year. There is no limit to price increases and residents frequently report an annual leap in the fee. As my hon. Friends have said, there is no transparency and little accountability.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. I draw a comparison between the fees that councils ordinarily charge for communal services and the kind of fees she is talking about. Does she agree that if councils were so opaque and unreasonable, they would rightly be held to task by their electorate?

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We need more transparency and greater accountability, and I will come on to how we might secure those things. One of the things that homeowners have noted is their frustration that they do not have any control over who the managing agent is. The relationship between the big builders and their favourite management companies and the processes for acquiring these communal spaces are shrouded in mystery. The fees appear to be plucked from thin air. In some cases, a vague “administration” category accounts for up to 70% of the total bill.

What do homeowners get in exchange for their fee? Of the 200 people who completed my survey, only one indicated a very good standard of maintenance. That was perhaps an optimistic assessment. The person went on to explain that “the grass is cut regularly, but…we were promised a play park and village green with a pond. None have materialised.”

Others complained of dead or dying trees, poorly maintained shruberies, wastelands, fly-tipping, broken or absent street lighting, playgrounds awaiting repair and a general absence of the management company, aside from requests for payment. Specific complaints included how Greenbelt was using a strimmer within a dedicated nature park set up to protect newts; in another case, a community hedgerow project was destroyed.

Homeowners in freehold properties currently have no way to challenge unfair fees or poor service; the power is almost entirely in the hands of the management company. My constituents have faced threats to block the on-sale of their properties, and they have been threatened with bailiffs and court action if they do not adhere to the demands of the management company.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend, as everyone else has, on securing this really important debate. Something that really frightened me about the case of one of my constituents was that she did not realise that if she defaults on her rent charge, the rent charge owner can repossess her property and enjoy the same rights as if she had never had the transfer of the freehold in the first place. I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that that is petrifying.

Helen Goodman: What my hon. Friend says is absolutely right. That is a misuse of the Law of Property Act 1925. That is why we are looking to the Government to make some legal changes. This is not just bad behaviour; this is clearly a deliberate strategy and the company has obviously taken very expensive legal advice in order to develop that strategy. To stop them, we will need some legal change.

I heard from somebody who lives in the west midlands—I do not know whether it was a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey)—who said that he had had a 17-year battle with Greenbelt and that he was charged legal fees of £25,000. Obviously, the ordinary homeowner cannot afford to shell out on legal fees like that.

Despite their name, property management companies appear to have no interest in actively managing the land they acquire. On the website of London and Economic Properties Ltd, a Wiltshire-based firm that manages the Middridge Vale development in Shildon in my constituency, property is listed under its “investments” section. The company boasts of its “enviable track record, investing across the property spectrum to deliver profits for shareholders.”

There is no mention of homeowners. It says of the land at Shildon that it “benefits from grant income from the Forestry Commission as well as a housing levy from the adjacent housing development which…will provide an annual payment in perpetuity of £100 from each of the 278 houses.”
There is no mention of the company’s obligations as the caretaker for the site. Ultimately, that is the problem: these extortionate fees and poor service are the result of a culture that sees housing as an abstract investment, rather than the foundations of our families and communities.

This is a massive scam. The House of Commons Library gave me figures that suggest that perhaps half a million people have been affected by this problem in the last 10 years. That means that somebody or some people are coming in about £100 million a year.

What change is needed? The Government have outlined their commitment to reform the process for those buying a new build home to obtain redress. They intend to bring forward legislation to require all developers to belong to a new homes ombudsman. They have also said that they hope to offer freeholders the same rights as leaseholders to challenge the reasonableness of charges at a property tribunal. Can the Minister say when that will be done? When will he bring forward these measures?

Legislation to improve access to dispute resolution is helpful, but it does not tackle the root problem. The Freehold Properties (Management Charges and Shared Facilities) Bill, which I introduced in November, recommended three changes for homeowners who are already caught in this trap. First, it would cap and regulate estate maintenance fees, to give homeowners financial stability and allow them to buy and sell their homes knowing that costs cannot increase indefinitely. Secondly, it would introduce measures to ensure that shared spaces are maintained to a proper standard, perhaps through something similar to the new homes ombudsman. Thirdly, it would contain provisions for residents if they chose to opt out of their management company and to self-manage, if that was what they wanted to do.

For estates yet to be built, the planning regulations need to be tightened, to require them to be built to an adoptable standard. Local authorities are currently often willing to adopt spaces in exchange for an agreed sum from the developer to cover upkeep for a fixed period. For example, Durham County Council asked for 15 years’ worth. That is a reasonable ask of an industry that can afford to pay its chief executive officer bonuses of £75 million.

Many of these estates were built with support from the Government’s Help to Buy scheme, financed by taxpayers. I would like the Minister to tell us this afternoon that the Government are going to stop providing support to any development using that model. Will the Minister also refer the mis-selling aspect of this to the Law Society, to strike off lawyers who have worked unethically in the interests of property dealers while taking fees and purporting to work for homebuyers?

A situation has arisen whereby the private estates model is rapidly becoming the norm for new developments, with those who have saved hard for their homes bearing an unfair burden and builders treating them as a cash cow. Homeowners do not want sympathy and understanding. They want action, and they would like to see action now. I hope the Minister will be able to make a clear, timetabled commitment this afternoon. I am looking forward to hearing his response.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate lasts one hour and the finish time is 6.41 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokesmen for the Opposition no later than 6.19 pm, but until then it is Back-Bench time. Four Members are seeking to contribute, but I will need to impose a time limit on speeches of five minutes. The first speaker will be Preet Kaur Gill.

5.57 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend Mr. Philip Hollobone for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for securing this debate and for the work she is doing with her Bill to regulate freeholders and to ensure that freeholders have sufficient rights.

Under section 19 of the Leasehold Reform Act 1967, the creation of schemes of management allows landlords or scheme managers to receive and require fees from management charges. I welcome the work to support new builds, but the Government should go further than that—I wonder whether my hon. Friend agrees—and strengthen the legal position of all freeholders so that they have access to information about where the money they are being forced to pay is going and what it is being spent on.

As it stands, the balance of power is not appropriate or fair. Freeholders are not able to ask for details of where the money they are charged as part of estate management schemes goes. However, management companies are able, by law, to use enforcement agents to collect the money. Does that seem like a reciprocal relationship?

I have residents in my constituency who are freeholders but who are still obligated to pay management fees, separate and additional to service charges. Residents are concerned about the lack of transparency, and they have a feeling of helplessness when trying to find out where the money is being spent, or how much money is left in the pot. Despite paying into this opaque fund, the freehold residents are entirely powerless to compel enforcement of the management scheme.

Freehold residents are unable to enforce the scheme that they pay into and cannot hold anyone to account over expenditure. We need transparency, for them to be able to hold it to account. I understand that the Government are legislating to give freeholders the equivalent rights to leaseholders when it comes to challenging service charges. Will the Minister extend that to management charges as well? If not, will he explain what the difference is?

5.59 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) on securing this debate.

I am old enough to remember when developers would build estates that were brought up to adoptable standards, a bond was put down and the council would adopt and take responsibility for generally doing what we all expect to be done around our homes. A lot has changed. Councils now do not have much money and are probably keen to pass that responsibility on. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland said, developers have found another money-making exercise—a bit like leasehold, really—to squeeze even more money out of their sales.
In my own area, companies such as Persimmon in Buckley, Taylor Wimpey in Penyffordd and Bloor Homes in Broughton have passed that maintenance requirement on to maintenance companies: my hon. Friend has mentioned Greenbelt, and Trinity is another one of the big players. A person needs only to look on the internet and Google those companies to see what the average resident thinks of the service they are providing.

When people move in, perhaps the charge is only £100 a year at first; it does not seem too much and people are not that bothered about it. The lawyers have perhaps not pointed it out because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland has said, they may well be close to the people selling the properties.

By year two, that charge may have risen to £200, and by year three, it may be £300 and so on. There is very little explanation of exactly what the charge is for, or indeed what the tendering process is for the people supposedly doing the work, when the work is actually done in the first place. These are not luxury London developments that have a swimming pool, a gym, and perhaps someone sitting on the front desk. The charge is for cutting the grass and, in some cases, maintaining a play area and maybe a nature area as well.

On top of the standard charge, there are things that are not covered—a very vague category. Greenbelt, in its nice, glossy little brochure showing happy, smiling people who are no doubt delighted to be paying the fees that the company charges, has a list of services. One of those is fencing, and under “What is covered?” it says “Fences will be checked as part of the routine supervisory inspections. The condition of the fence will be monitored and any repairs instructed as and when required.”

If we move on to things that are not covered but are chargeable, we find “fencing works”, which “will be identified as part of the routine supervisory inspections. The conditions of the fence will be monitored and any works instructed as and when required.” Now, to the ordinary person, those sound very similar, yet people are being charged extra for the work that is not covered.

Indeed, the list of things that can be charged for in these circumstances is a very open one; as I have said, residents in many cases are not aware of what they are being charged for. When people move in, certainly in their first year, there does not appear to be any breakdown of the charges. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland said, when a breakdown is provided, there does not appear to be any breakdown of the charges. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland has said, they may well be close to the people selling the properties.

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Catherine McKinnell: I see a lot of similarities in the speech that my hon. Friend is making. Does he agree that there is frustration not only about the charges being levied, but about the fact that the standards being maintained are often not as good as they would be had those estates been adopted? I know of some cases in which children have practically lived in a home, left that home and gone to university before they have the basics, such as pavements, on their estates.

Mark Tami: My hon. Friend is right. The issue of how estates are left is a broader one: quite often, the moment the last house is sold, the developer does not want to know. As for the standard of work that is being carried out by the maintenance companies, I have heard from loads of people who say that they go out themselves and cut the grass in the communal areas, because those are left in such a terrible state.

Many people have described the charges as like a second council tax. They are now reaching a level that is not the £100 that people started off with; it is a much higher figure, particularly for something that most people thought was covered by the council tax that they pay in the first place. Freeholders who face those charges are now coming to me and saying they are increasingly worried that they could affect the saleability of their property in the future, just as leaseholders are telling me that sales are falling through because people look at a property and say, “I am not going to buy that.” That is just not acceptable.

At the moment, there are effectively no legal protections for people. Leaseholders have some, but they are very weak. My constituency has a lot of mixed estates where, between two houses next to one another—often both exactly the same—one is leasehold and one is freehold. What they have in common is that they both have to pay management charges.

I will summarise because I know other hon. Members wish to speak. People feel abandoned. They feel that the law does not actually protect them and that they do not have any redress. I welcome what the Government have said about leaseholds. My concern is that that relates only to people building houses, selling them and moving on. What about the people already affected by the arrangements, just as leaseholders are? We need to look after them and ensure that they have fair redress against unfair charges. Residents should have the ability—where they want to—to form their own management companies, run their own maintenance and put out tenders. The council might want to tender for some of that work and could provide it at a considerably cheaper cost. The charges are unfair. We really need to get to grips with the issue because otherwise we will store up huge problems for people in the future.

6.6 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Hollobone. I am delighted to follow my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami). We may be on separate sides of national boundaries, but our constituents clearly have many issues in common, not least the terrible way that exploitation has seeped into what should be a well-regulated and secure investment.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) on securing the debate and on her work to address these issues through her private Member’s Bill. Hon. Members will be aware that I have also introduced my own Bill, to usher in a fairer, more streamlined and transparent system to enable the purchase of freeholds by leaseholders. On many occasions, both in this Chamber and the main Chamber, I have listed the abuses perpetrated by freeholders in the current feudal system. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland gave an excellent explanation of the issues in the management of such properties, and after listening to it, I believe that there are many parallels between the two measures.
Regulation is long overdue. Homeowners have been subjected to unjustified extra costs and there is a distinct lack of transparency. It is clearly another example of homeowners falling foul of greedy developers and the more insidious practices that they have adopted in recent years. We have seen that happen with ground rents and consent fees for leasehold properties, whether flats or houses, where developers have become ever more adept at squeezing cash out of homeowners for the provision of grounds maintenance and other communal services.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland highlighted, we now see “fleecehold” estate fees. Freeholders and residents on private housing developments find themselves facing escalating costs when the developers from which they purchased their homes in good faith sell off the grounds maintenance to private providers. In blocks of flats, the practice of spurious service charges has developed. In my constituency, a management company that managed only four flats in a block suddenly increased the service charge from around £50 a year to £911 a year. Many of those charges were questionable and the insurance charge in particular stood out, because the insurer seemed to be very well connected and had the same name as the management company. That would simply not be allowed for any other consumer purchase, so why is it allowed in this instance?

As hon. Members have said, the idea of the developer paying the local authority a commuted sum to cut the grass and maintain the common parts has had its day. I am unclear whether the blame for that lies with cash-strapped local authorities asking for too much or with developers being unprepared to cough up more funds in advance. The net effect of that is that more and more homeowners are being asked to pay twice for the maintenance of open spaces: once through a management fee and once through their council tax.

Council tax pays for lots of things, but something as visible and obvious as grounds maintenance leads people to ask a pertinent question: why are they facing a double whammy? My suspicion is that developers will always be tempted to save themselves the expense of paying an up-front sum to the local authority by instead letting their customers pay further down the line, long after they have fled the scene. Of course, someone buying their first home—probably with Help to Buy—will, in reality, have nowhere else to go and will have to accept those arrangements whether or not they genuinely consent to them.

What is wrong with just building and selling family homes? Why are buyers being subjected to covert efforts to squeeze extra income? Is the sector so avaricious that it has to squeeze every last penny out of young families who have to scrimp and save just to get on the housing ladder? As with ground rent, consent fees and leaseholds, our plc house builders have had £8 billion of help through the Help to Buy scheme. They have thwarted that assistance to rip off customers in their own schemes. Developers simply cannot be trusted to play fair with their customers, or with us, as wider taxpayers.

We have a huge shortage of housing. There are significant barriers to buyers getting on to the housing ladder, and a handful of huge companies are responsible for the vast majority of housing delivery. That reliance on a small group of developers has been a very poor deal for the taxpayer, and was the backdrop against which the leasehold scandal emerged.

It cannot be right that the companies that are guilty of the industrial-scale rip-offs that we have heard about regarding both leaseholds and the issue being discussed today are the same ones that we end up relying on to get out of our very real and damaging housing crisis. There is an over-reliance on the market—a market that, to me, is broken—to deliver the new homes that we desperately need.

The net effect is that there is little protection for homeowners. People deserve far more protection than they currently get. Sadly, I have seen very little evidence to suggest that developers will act responsibly and adopt fair and reasonable practices on a voluntary basis. The whole system needs a shake-up, and it needs it now.

6.10 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who is a close neighbour, for securing this debate on such an important issue, which affects every constituency in the country, and certainly many of my constituents in Sunderland Central.

In my years as an MP, numerous constituents have come to me about the subject of freehold properties and management costs. They come with real issues regarding the environment around their properties and the lack of care by companies. They often pay large sums of money that increase without much notice or any relation to cost. They are paying the money—often hundreds of pounds a year—that they agreed to and not getting the services or the maintenance that they are paying for. In an area such as Sunderland, which is a low-wage area, it is often a large proportion of the money coming into people’s homes every week. They are keeping their side of the contract, but the companies are not keeping theirs.

I would like to highlight a couple of things that have happened to my constituents. A light in a communal area took six months to get fixed, and when it was fixed the light was unsuitable for the job it had to do, and was not to the standard of the one before. That led to all sorts of issues to do with safety and all the other problems, including antisocial behaviour, that come when areas are not lighted.

Another example was people coming to do a grounds maintenance job sitting in the van all day because there was nobody to direct them or instruct them about what to do. Not only is paying people to sit in a van not knowing what to do an absolute waste of the company’s resources, it wastes the hard-earned money of my constituents, who pay fees for a job that should be done.

I endorse the points that have been made by my colleagues, and I will not repeat them. Sadly in the current climate, many people would like local authorities to take over maintenance issues, but in Sunderland we have had cuts to our local authority budgets of some £250 million since 2010, so financially it is simply not an option. Councils are struggling to maintain their frontline services, and they do not have the funds to put aside to take over that responsibility.
People are not going to trial because they fear the consultations on fixing the leasehold sector that the Government admit that failure when that has abjectly failed to stop abuses in the leasehold sector? The Government presenting access to tribunals as the solution and in April last year they accepted that managing agents needed independent regulations. I understand that a working group under Lord Best is designing the new regulatory regime to cover aspects such as leaseholder service charges. Will the Minister confirm whether freehold estate management will be covered by the new independent regulator, and if not, why not?

The proposals set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland are much more likely to tackle the abuse of homeowners, with caps on estate charges, minimum standards and powers for residents to take over management of communal areas. That last proposal would mirror the system of commonhold for shared residential property. I hope the working group currently designing the regulatory system will consider those proposals.

The third failure of Government is that they have let a system develop whereby roads, green spaces and other public spaces are effectively privatised. Even those who are not being ripped off are effectively paying twice, as has been pointed out. They pay council tax, which contributes to maintaining communal areas under council control, and then they pay again for the private maintenance of their own areas. The Government could stop that all together—they should act. We have discussed who is at fault; I do not think we can blame councils, because of the 50% cuts in local authority funding under this Government and the £7.8 billion predicted black hole in local services by 2024-25.

Overall, the Government have been too slow, too weak and lacking in ambition. Today’s debate shows that the Opposition could do better across the board. The Government talk a lot about their credentials on home ownership, but today’s debate is just another example of their failing people who have worked hard to buy their own home. Eight years of Conservative failure on home ownership is exacerbated by this very contentious issue, which affects many people and on which the Government could act.

I want to end by quoting the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland, who said that housing is being seen as an abstract investment rather than as the foundation of our families and communities. Homeowners want action and they want it now, and I very much agree with them.
This Government are committed to making the housing market work. We aim to increase house building to an average of 300,000 net new homes a year by the mid-2020s. It is vital that as housing supply increases, the quality of new developments continues to improve. We expect all housing developers to deliver good-quality housing and estate facilities, to deliver it on time, and to treat house buyers fairly. Fairness includes making sure house buyers are aware of arrangements for the upkeep of communal facilities and any fees for which they may be liable.

As hon. Members have pointed out, many freeholders must pay charges towards the maintenance or upkeep of communal areas on an estate. The obligation to pay these charges might be provided by a deed of covenant or through an estate rent charge that forms part of the purchase contract. These charges can include contributions towards the upkeep of open spaces on an estate, or for the maintenance of roads and other infrastructure that is not adopted by the relevant authorities. Hon. Members have quite rightly raised concerns about the lack of redress should a freeholder disagree with these charges, and there have been disputes about who should be responsible for, and control, the maintenance of communal areas. In many cases, contracts do not specify, limit or cap those freeholder charges. This lack of transparency leaves homeowners in a vulnerable position.

Leaseholders have a whole suite of protections and rights that enable them to hold management companies to account. Freeholders have no such equivalent, even though they might be paying for the same or similar services. The current situation is unfair to freeholders, and we are committed to introducing legislation to plug that gap. We set out our proposed approach to implementing these measures in the recent leasehold reform consultation, which closed on 26 November. We intend to create a new statutory regime for freeholders that is based on the rights enjoyed by leaseholders. This would ensure that maintenance charges are reasonably incurred and that services provided are of an acceptable standard, and it includes a right to challenge the reasonableness of charges at the property tribunal.

Mark Tami: As with leaseholders, it should be relatively easy to sort out the problem. The issue is that people are already in these arrangements. We should ensure that they can do something about it, so that they do not feel that they are not covered or that no one cares about them.

Kit Malthouse: The right hon. Gentleman raises a valid point. We are also considering whether freeholders should have a right to change the provider of maintenance services by applying to the tribunal for the appointment of a new manager, which might be useful for existing freeholders if they are dissatisfied with the service they receive. The Government intend to introduce legislation to implement the changes as soon as parliamentary time allows. The hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) quite rightly challenged us on when that might be; she will know that we have an exciting and packed legislative timetable at the moment, but our aspiration is that the legislation will be introduced within the next 12 months. I realise that there are many impatient freeholders out there, but we have to deal with the small matter of national destiny before we get on to equally pressing matters on the domestic agenda. I assure her that we will give it our attention as soon as we can.

It is absolutely right that consumers should have fair, quick and easy ways to get things put right when they have problems. In October we announced our intention to introduce legislation to require all developers to belong to a new homes ombudsman. Last year, we consulted on how we could improve redress for residents across all housing sectors, and we will publish our response to that consultation shortly.

It has been argued that local authorities should be compelled to adopt all communal facilities on a new estate. At this point it is worth pausing to consider planning arrangements and how they support new developments. When a new development is granted planning permission, local authorities can use conditions, or a section 106 planning obligation, to secure a commitment from developers to provide and maintain open and communal space. This means that the local authority does not have to adopt or maintain the land at its own expense.

It is up to developers and the local planning authority to agree appropriate funding arrangements as part of those commitments. Conditions and planning obligations cannot, however, currently be used to compel local authorities to do something. The local authority has powers to ensure that developers build and maintain communal facilities to the standards and quality set out in the planning permission. In terms of roads, local highways authorities are responsible for the maintenance of local public roads in England. A decision on whether to adopt a road is a matter for the local highway authority and the Government have no direct role in that process.

It has been suggested that freeholders who pay these charges should receive a rebate in their council tax. We think that argument is misplaced. The amount of council tax due from each of us is not adjusted to reflect the specific level of services we receive as residents of the area. Instead, the level of council tax helps the authority to deliver a broad range of services to the wider community in its area. It is open to local authorities to offer council tax discounts to individuals or groups of taxpayers. This is an entirely local decision.

In the end, all these matters have to be paid for. There is only so much money that can be extracted from a particular housing development. It is therefore at the discretion of local authorities to decide the balance of 106, the cost to them of adopting measures, and where and when maintenance should fall on residents rather than on the local authority.

It should always be clear to potential purchasers what the arrangements are for the upkeep of open space and the maintenance of roads. However, we do not think that requiring local authorities to adopt all communal facilities on new developments is the right approach. It removes local flexibility and, in our view, sends the wrong message to developers about their responsibilities.

I do agree with the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland regarding redress. Consumers must have effective ways to get things put right when they have a problem with their housing. That is why we are committed to legislate, so that freeholders have a right to challenge the reasonableness of any maintenance charges for which
they are liable. That is why we will establish a new homes ombudsman to protect the interests of homebuyers and hold developers to account when things go wrong.

The hon. Member for Croydon Central asked four specific questions. First, I am certainly willing to consider the suggestion to use Help to Buy as a lever to improve standards. Secondly, on mis-selling, it is open to any hon. Member to make a reference to the regulatory authorities, whether that be the FCA or the Senior Salaries Review Body. Is the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland still on the Treasury Committee?

Helen Goodman indicated dissent.

Kit Malthouse: Well, the hon. Lady knows the FCA well, so if she wants to make a reference, then by all means she should. She asked me about the legislative timetable. Our aspiration is for some time in the next 12 months. The terms of reference have not been decided for Lord Best’s review of leasehold and whether those lessons could be transferred across the field. We will certainly consider that suggestion as part of the process.

In conclusion, it is certainly the case that as a constituency MP I have experience of exactly the issues that have been raised, and I have been in discussion, shall we say, with the developers concerned in my own constituency, so I am well aware of the issues that have been aired this afternoon. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for bringing such focus to the matter. I assure her that we will take action as soon as we can.

6.28 pm

Helen Goodman: We have had an important and worthwhile debate. I am grateful to all my colleagues for their contributions. I was overwhelmed with offers for sponsorship from across the House when I introduced the ten-minute rule Bill.

I think we are creeping forward—or, rather, the Minister is. There will be legislation—perhaps in 2019, perhaps not. He has accepted that we need a new right of redress. He has not, however, agreed to any system for regulating the fees or ensuring transparency. I think that will be a disappointment to many of my constituents. However, I shall do as he suggests and take it up with the Financial Conduct Authority. That will be the next act in my campaign, to make some progress. It is clear that the issue affects hundreds of thousands of people and we need change fast.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered freehold estate fees.

6.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
FTSE 100 Company Pay Ratios

9.30 am

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered FTSE 100 company pay ratios.

It is a privilege to be under your chairmanship today, Mrs Moon. I have to be honest and open with the Chamber: I am guilty of trying to dumb down parliamentary proceedings; I attempted to call this debate “Fat Cat Friday”. However, the Table Office pointed out that that would not be correct in the circumstances. I wanted to call the debate that because by lunchtime on Friday 4 January, the UK’s top chief executives had earned more than their average employees would earn over the entire year. Those chief executives take home astronomical figures that are more like telephone numbers than salaries. Although the average employee has seen their salary remain stubbornly low, the pay packets of the FTSE 100 chief executive officers have risen by an average of 11% over the last year alone, soaring to a staggering average of £3.9 million per year. How can that be right, just or fair?

Let me emphasise right from the beginning that I have absolutely no qualms about those at the top being paid well; I appreciate the demands of running one of the UK’s biggest organisations. And I am not, at the moment, calling for a pay cap or a widespread cut to chief executives’ pay. I am calling for fairness—for the importance of the contribution of those at the bottom to be recognised in line with the contribution of those in the boardroom; and for organisations to determine the pay and reward schemes of all employees in one whole-company pay policy.

I will describe in more detail the pay ratios across the FTSE 100, and will consider the causes and consequences of such extreme differences in pay within organisations. Then I hope to detail the reality in some specific organisations, before considering the tangible steps that would not be correct in the circumstances. I wanted to call the debate that because by lunchtime on Friday 4 January, the UK’s top chief executives had earned more than their average employees would earn over the entire year. Those chief executives take home astronomical figures that are more like telephone numbers than salaries. Although the average employee has seen their salary remain stubbornly low, the pay packets of the FTSE 100 chief executive officers have risen by an average of 11% over the last year alone, soaring to a staggering average of £3.9 million per year. How can that be right, just or fair?

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I will describe in more detail the pay ratios across the FTSE 100, and will consider the causes and consequences of such extreme differences in pay within organisations. Then I hope to detail the reality in some specific organisations, before considering the tangible steps that the Minister and this Government should take to combat such unfairness in the workplace.

Let us start with the FTSE 100. In advance of this debate, Will Turvill of The Mail on Sunday made a remarkable analysis of the pay ratio between FTSE 100 CEOs and the average wage of workers at their firms. Staggeringly, his results reveal that one FTSE 100 company, Melrose Industries, pays its chief executive a completely eye-watering 1,000 times more than the average wage of its employees. I appreciate that this is an extreme example, but few of the other 99 companies on the FTSE 100 index can consider themselves exempt from being similarly unjust.

Even among the FTSE 100, there is inconsistency and disparity. A FTSE 100 CEO is more likely to be called David or Steve than to be a woman or to come from an ethnic minority. What is more, the six female FTSE 100 chief executives earn just 54% of the salary of their 94 male colleagues. However, that is a debate for another day, because it is the FTSE 100 index as a whole that I will focus on today.

Back in the late 1990s, the pay of a FTSE 100 CEO was an extortionate 59 times higher than that of their average employee. If we fast-forward 20 years, it has sky-rocked to being an eye-watering 145 times higher, and rising. Let that sink in: it means that it would take the median UK worker an extraordinary 137 years to earn a FTSE 100 CEO’s annual pay. Is a chief executive today working that much harder than they did just 20 years ago? The statistics suggest otherwise, as there is very little evidence that soaring CEO pay has incentivised or been the reward for better company performance, because the value of the FTSE 100 has changed little since the late 1990s. However, the pay of FTSE CEOs has increased by 300%. Meanwhile, two thirds of these top firms fail to pay the living wage.

Such mind-boggling figures are difficult to comprehend. To provide some perspective, a FTSE 100 CEO is paid an estimated 132 times more than a police officer, 140 times more than a teacher, 165 times more than a nurse, and an astronomical 312 times more than a carer. These indefensible ratios are a slap in the face for hard-working employees across our country who, at the very least, expect to take home a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work.

Before this debate, the House of Commons digital engagement team kindly sought the views of the public on this matter. One person said that “when their employees are working full time and not being able to afford proper accommodation, energy, food, transport or children, suddenly the difference in pay seems rather stark.”

Another person suggested that “there should be a pay ratio, so if CEOs wish to continue enjoying these luxuries they must ensure that their lowest paid employees are earning a sufficient amount.”

I believe that the pay ratios that I am describing are utterly unacceptable, unjust and unfair. As the executive director of the Equality Trust, Dr Wanda Wyporska, says:

“A society that values its teachers, care workers and nurses at less than 1% of a FTSE CEO is beyond broken”.

Her view is a common one, with an Oxfam survey finding that 72% of people want to see the Government urgently addressing the income gap between rich and poor.

What is causing such extraordinary executive pay to continue soaring? Perhaps it is the fact that former or serving chief executives pack the remuneration committees that set pay levels at large companies; perhaps it is the decline in trade union membership; or, most likely, it is the inaction of the Government on ensuring that fairness is at the heart of the world of work.

These pay ratios stem not just from extortionate salaries, but from extraordinary incentive schemes that are increasingly reserved only for those in an organisation’s boardroom. I must be clear once again: I have no problem retaining incentive pay for executives. However, incentive schemes should be available to all staff on the same terms.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I am sorry for stopping a good speech, but my hon. Friend mentioned incentives; these CEOs also
have the incentive of awards, including CBEs. Paula Vennells of the Post Office got a CBE, as most of these fat cats do. They end up getting awards, OBEs, knighthoods and all the rest of it, while the workers are suffering. There are people at the Post Office who face difficulties because of Horizon, a new system that has come in. Good postmasters—good people who are loyal to their communities—have been taken to court, and some of them are now going back to court. Will these CEOs be stripped of their knighthoods and awards?

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will consider the Post Office a little later in my speech.

Having such incentives for all staff seems like a common-sense way of providing sensible alignment between average workforce pay and executive pay. It is a straightforward, practical idea to have a whole-company pay policy. Let me describe in more detail the reality at specific organisations in the FTSE 100 to illustrate the inequality that grows in the absence of a whole-company pay policy. I will start with Persimmon, whose former boss, Jeff Fairburn, last year received, on the back of Help to Buy, £47 million, which is an extraordinary 882 times the average salary of his workers, before he lost his job. We all remember the backlash when Mr Fairburn was granted a £75 million bonus. In the heart of a housing crisis, do we really think that he should receive such a staggering sum, or should we have seen that money helping young couples who are looking to get on the housing ladder?

How about the owner of Ladbrokes, GVC, whose chief executive, Kenny Alexander, raked in pay that was a huge 484 times higher than the average pay of his workforce? And how about Tesco, whose CEO, Dave Lewis, received a £4.9 million pay packet, which is 303 times greater than the average pay of his employees? Is he working 303 times harder, longer, or better than them?

Then there is Sainsbury’s: a pillar of the Great British high street. Over 148 years, it has established a reputation as a leading retailer and a good company to work for, with the highest. I ask the Minister how that policy will have the incentive of awards, including CBEs. Paula Vennells of the Post Office got a CBE, as most of these fat cats do. They end up getting awards, OBEs, knighthoods and all the rest of it, while the workers are suffering. There are people at the Post Office who face difficulties because of Horizon, a new system that has come in. Good postmasters—good people who are loyal to their communities—have been taken to court, and some of them are now going back to court. Will these CEOs be stripped of their knighthoods and awards?

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Then there is Sainsbury’s: a pillar of the Great British high street. Over 148 years, it has established a reputation as a leading retailer and a good company to work for, but its lack of a whole-company pay policy has led to the most disgraceful discrepancy in its staff salaries. Under the guise of an increase in basic pay, 9,000 loyal and long-standing Sainsbury’s staff are set to lose up to £3,000 a year from 2020. They will forgo their paid breaks, the night shift will be shortened, and their Sunday premium will be removed. While those shop floor staff will see their bonus scheme scrapped under these new contracts, CEO Mike Coupe takes home an eye-watering bonus of £427,000 as part of his £3.4 million pay packet, and although the salaries of those staff are crumbling, their bills, mortgages and rent are still the same at the end of each month. I wonder whether Sainsbury’s remuneration committee gave a moment’s thought to those staff when it signed off its executive bonuses. When the board and remuneration committee sit down to discuss what the pay package for Sainsbury’s CEO is going to be, they should also be deciding the pay and conditions for their lowest-paid staff. If they thought about those two things together, there would be a bit more modesty, a bit more honesty and a bit more embarrassment.
unpopular with the general public and reduce staff morale. The Mail on Sunday revealed this weekend that CYBG, the owner of Clydesdale bank and Yorkshire bank, faces a shareholder revolt at its annual general meeting over excessive bonuses for bosses.

However, we should not wait for isolated pushbacks. I suggest that the Minister takes note of the example of Sweden, ranked one of the happiest countries in the world, where companies with pay gaps face fines if they fail to close them. Furthermore, trade unions should have reasonable access to workplaces, and all FTSE 100 companies should strive to be accredited by the Living Wage Foundation. Most of all, I call for the important contribution of those at the bottom to be recognised in line with the contribution of those at the top, and for organisations to determine the pay and reward schemes of all their employees through one whole-company pay policy. If an incentive scheme is made available for some staff, it should be on offer for all within that organisation, on the same terms. Why should any organisation have a rule for just some employees, not a rule for all?

If a whole-company pay policy does not work, perhaps it is time to introduce a maximum pay ratio at those organisations. In an ideal world, I would not want society to be so prescriptive, but the worstening inequality I have described undermines our democracy, and I believe that our social democracy relies on fairness. It is based on the belief that people will behave reasonably, so when our democracy is not fair, the state must become involved. This is about more than just money, the economy and the world of work. Unfairness at these levels breeds cynicism—the feeling that the system just does not work for the ordinary person—and if that system does not work, why should a person trust in, vote in or participate in it? A lack of fairness produces spiralling disharmony and disaffection in society, and it is our duty as democrats to solve it.

The fact that it takes just three days for the UK’s top chief executives to earn more than the average employee is utterly shameful. After a hard day’s work, the very least that an employee deserves is to take home a fair wage that is in proportion to that of their colleagues. Across the FTSE 100, the absence of whole-company pay policies results in organisations rewarding the minority in the boardroom at the expense of the majority at the bottom. Enforcing or encouraging a whole-company pay policy in those organisations would be a sensible, logical and practical step towards ensuring that all hard-working employees receive a fair deal at work.

9.48 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, Mrs Moon, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on having secured it. It is unfortunate that it is not as well subscribed as I had expected it to be; I had thought that this was a great debate to be involved in, on an issue that matters a huge amount to an awful lot of people who live in all the countries of the UK. I will highlight a few figures, some of which have already been mentioned by the hon. Lady; I will also talk about what we are doing about some of these issues in Scotland, and what we would like to do about them.

The remuneration of FTSE 100 CEOs between 2009-10 and 2017-18, over the course of this Conservative Government, has gone up by 66%, which is a significant increase. One of the interesting stats that I discovered when I was looking into this issue is that in 1980, median FTSE 100 CEO pay was 11 times that of the median worker. By 2010, that had risen to 116 times the pay of the median worker—an absolutely massive increase that surely does not reflect an increased workload of that level. I imagine that those CEOs are not doing 10 times the amount of work they were doing in 1980, and that the people who are working at the bottom of those companies are working just as hard as they were in 1980. An increase in the ratio to that extent cannot be justified.

In 2017, the mean pay of a FTSE 100 boss was £5.7 million. Compared with many people who live in my constituency or throughout these islands, I have a significantly large salary. I am very grateful for that, but even on my relatively large salary, £5.7 million is a number that I cannot even comprehend. It is a ridiculous amount of money for people to be earning.

I understand that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden was talking not about the particular salary that those individuals receive but about the ratio, and that is what I want to come on to. The important point about this debate is that it is about equality, and it goes much wider than FTSE 100 companies. We have massive inequality throughout the countries of the UK and much more can be done to improve the situation. When seeking to improve things, I tend to say that we can do so in Parliament, because we have the ability to lead the way as parliamentarians. We often fail, but we have that ability. We also have the ability to legislate to ensure that FTSE 100 companies can lead the way for all companies across the UK in removing the levels of inequality.

It is not only the person on the street or the person working at the bottom of these companies who is unhappy; there is also continuing shareholder dissent. It is important that shareholders are empowered and have the ability to make changes. They are unhappy and there is backlash from them about the massive bonuses and huge pay increases received by CEOs. If we empowered shareholders a bit more, they would have the ability to make those choices to help reduce inequality throughout the companies. Shareholders do not want to be associated with a company that has a CEO receiving a massive salary, massive bonuses and massive pay rises while the worker working on the basic wage is having their bonus scheme removed, for example. It is important that shareholders who have that moral compass can make that mark on the company.

It is important to look at corporate governance legislation and regulations. The changes on reporting the gender pay gap are helpful, but they do not go far enough. It is good that we have reporting on the gender pay gap, but there should be something—not so much a carrot, as a stick—to ensure that the gender pay gap improves. It would be unreasonable to ask companies with a massive gender pay gap to reduce it to nothing in one year, but it would be reasonable for the Government to mandate companies to show progress in reducing the gender pay gap. That should involve not just saying, “This is what we will do about it”, but, “This is the timeline on which we expect to make progress. We will reduce our gender pay gap by 5% in the next two years and reduce it further after that.”
A similar approach could be taken to wage ratios. Companies could be subject to a reporting requirement to submit details on how they will improve the ratio with set targets, and they could be subject to some kind of punishment if they do not meet those targets, rather than them just saying, “This is what we are doing”, but with no set outcomes. That is where a lot of people are on gender pay reporting and ratios.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government have put social justice at the heart of civil service pay policy. Public sector employees in Scotland are paid at least the Scottish living wage, and we have no age requirement for that. Under-25s who would receive a lower minimum wage under UK legislation are eligible to receive the Scottish living wage if they work in the Scottish public sector, no matter their age. We recognise that just because someone is 24, it does not mean they have fewer outgoings than someone who is 25. They could be in exactly the same set-up, renting a flat and with a small child, whether they are 24 or 25. The Government desperately need to tackle the fact that under-25s are being paid less. The SNP and the Scottish National party has been vociferously making the case at every possible opportunity, including my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Glasgow East (David Linden) with a ten-minute rule Bill.

The UK Government are not taking the necessary action, so we are asking them to give Holyrood the power to legislate on maximum and minimum wages. That would address the lower end of the spectrum where people should be paid an actual living wage—one that they can really live on, not a pretend living wage—and, at the other end, maximum wages and bonus payments. We want power over wage ratios. That is not to say that we have a set idea of exactly how we would legislate on high wage ratios, but if Holyrood had the power to do so we could at least have those conversations and consultations. We could come up with a policy that would work for employees, shareholders and the general public. We believe that we are more likely to take action than the UK Government, given their track record. They have not moved as far as we would to tackle inequality in Scotland.

In terms of SNP policy, in June 2018 we had a very good debate at SNP conference about wage ratios. We agreed as a party—our policy is made at party conference—that wage ratios would be one way to tackle inequality and that we would consider it and take it on. An independent Scotland would have a wage ratios consultation and discussion and, if possible, a policy. We would look at the best possible way to do that.

I want to talk a little about the real living wage and employment in Scotland. Employment law is reserved to Westminster, which we have argued against because the SNP and Scottish parliamentarians in general—this view is not reserved to the SNP—have much more respect for workers’ rights, so there is much more likelihood of them improving if we had the ability to legislate in our Parliament. Despite not having power over the issue, we have tried to make changes in our society and, to a limited extent, we have. A lower proportion of people in Scotland are on zero-hours contracts than in any other nation of the UK. The Scottish Government were the first Government in the UK to become a living wage employer, so we are putting our money where our mouth is. We are saying to people, “We are proving that we can do this. We are proving that we will put workers’ rights at the heart of what we do. That is why we believe that Holyrood should have power over that.”

Down here, we vociferously opposed the Trade Union Act 2016. We disagreed with a huge number of things in it. It is incredibly important that we have strong trade unions. If trade unions had the abilities that they previously had, their voice would be heard much more loudly. It would be amplified by the legislation, rather than quashed. Wage ratios would be tackled much more vociferously by the trade unions.

In this Parliament, we have also promoted a Bill to ban unpaid trial shifts, which would give rights to those workers who are forced to work for nothing while doing a trial shift. We promoted a Bill to give workers in precarious work the same rights as employees. It is incredibly important to ensure that they enjoy the same rights as people in more stable employment. In fact, it is even more important for someone in precarious work to have those rights than someone in work that is a bit more stable. That was a good Bill, promoted by the SNP.

Our most recent Bill was on employment rights. It would have stopped gig economy workers and small and medium-sized enterprises getting late payments, which is important for cash flow. Our Bill made clear the importance of someone working in the gig economy being paid on time.

Lastly, I want to talk about what the Scottish Government have done. In Scotland, we have the fairest income tax system in the UK. Some 55% of our taxpayers pay less than they would if they lived elsewhere in the UK. About half of English taxpayers pay more than they would if they lived in Scotland. It is the lowest-paid workers, not those at the top, who are paying more in England and less in Scotland. Next year, the top 1% will be asked to pay a little more on their income, and the remaining 99% will pay the same or less than at present. I therefore suggest that the Scottish Government’s policy on income tax is much better and fairer than that of the UK Government.

We are regularly attacked by the Scottish Tories for what we have done to improve fairness in income tax, but since we introduced the Scottish rate of income tax and varied the rates, our economy has grown faster than that of England, so the suggestions that all sorts of chaos would follow have not come to pass. There is a real difference between the actions of the Scottish Government and those of the UK Government. At every opportunity the Scottish Government have pursued fairness and attempted to reduce inequality, and the Bills that the SNP has promoted down here have attempted to reduce inequality in the whole of the UK because workers’ rights are currently a reserved matter.

Holyrood does not have the full range of powers over this matter. We want workers’ rights to be devolved to Scotland. However, given the chaos that is happening and the impact that Brexit will have on the lowest paid in particular, it is increasingly evident that Scottish independence is the only way forward. If Scotland had control over workers’ rights, we would make better decisions than the UK Government are currently making, and that makes the case for Scottish independence ever stronger.
Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this important and timely debate. Such debates expose our politics and the difference between political parties. It is vital that we discuss not only pay ratios, but solutions to extortiate pay, such as an excessive pay levy, and improved collective bargaining for workers through strong trade unions as a way to uplift the pay of millions of workers. It is also crucial that we are able to place the extortionately high pay of FTSE 100 chief executives in the context of low pay and the crisis of work in this country, where millions struggle to make ends meet, and where work is certainly no longer the preventer of poverty, which is a reality for millions of people.

Despite this state of affairs, as was mentioned, by luncheon on 4 January, the top chief executives in the UK had been paid more than their average employee is paid in an entire year—an extraordinary fact. Every single year, that date and time comes sooner in the year. Unless action is taken, it will be one minute past midnight on 1 January when those people will have been paid much more than their employees. Every year, the Government take no action on that extraordinary fact. Those at the top are increasing their wealth.

I agree with my hon. Friend: perhaps this place should relax a little, because “fat cats” is exactly the right title for those executives who now get 133 times more than the average worker, which means that the salary of the average FTSE chief executive is the same as that of 386 workers on the minimum wage. It is politically poignant to note that some people are not outraged by that statistic. They are quite comfortable with the inordinate, huge salaries of executives who are paid grossly more than those who work for them.

I am sure that nobody would argue—my hon. Friend touched on this—that a FTSE 100 chief executive works 133 times harder than a hospital porter, a cleaner or a caterer. I went on a solidarity protest yesterday with strikers at the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Let us think about the caterer on exactly £8 an hour fighting the London living wage. That works out at about £1,280 a month if they work a 40-hour week every single week of the month. If we think of rent, transport, bills and food, that person has a tiny amount to live on every month. I am sure nobody would argue that a FTSE 100 chief executive works 133 times harder than a teacher or a nurse in our NHS, or that they somehow have a combined worth of 386 workers.

Kirsty Blackman: The hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful point. Does it annoy her as much as it annoys me that the Tories talk about hard-working families, but they do not mean hospital porters? They mean people who are much higher up the tree. Hospital porters, cleaners, chefs and the people she talks about work incredibly hard every day just to make £8 an hour.

Laura Pidcock: And that work should be valued. It is no coincidence that those people who work really hard, but very often still cannot survive and do not have enough money to pay the bills, get into debt to pay for everyday items—not for luxury holidays, or any luxuries at all. Those people should be at the heart of our concerns in this place. I am mindful never to use the word “earn” when we talk about the pay of the very few at the top. What could they possibly do to earn such large amounts of money?

It is crucial to recognise the context in which FTSE 100 pay ratios are widening. In a stark contrast to the stockpiling of wealth by a few, years of austerity and wage stagnation mean that millions of workers across the country struggle to make ends meet, as I say. In-work poverty is rising and household debt is at its highest rate. Many people rely on borrowing, and one in five workers—more than 5 million people—are paid less than a living wage. That is a huge increase from 3.4 million in 2009. Insecure work has without a doubt become the norm, with nearly 4 million people—one in nine workers—facing uncertainty and worry. They are trapped. To illustrate the low-pay trap, one in four employees earning the minimum wage for five years has been unable to move out of that low-pay trap. Some people do two or three jobs to try to pay the bills, but it has not always been like that.

In 1980, as was mentioned, the median pay of directors in FTSE 100 companies was £63,000, and median pay across the country was £5,400. The ratio of executive pay to the average wage then, less than 40 years ago, was 11:1. In 2002, the pay of a FTSE 100 CEO had shot up to 79 times that of their average employee, and last year it had reached 150 times. This place is doing nothing to stop that runaway train of inequality. I seriously hope that those ratios are unacceptable and completely unjustifiable to anyone. It is particularly obscene that this escalation has come at a time when millions of people are struggling. There is a stark contrast between those two sets of people.

No doubt the Minister will refer to the Government’s reforms to tackle excessive pay in her speech shortly, but I want to make it absolutely clear that under this Government, not only has pay inequality continued to rise, but so has the speed at which it increases. I am proud that Opposition MPs are committed to taking action, because doing nothing is not good enough. When I have been out campaigning, loads of times I have heard people say, “The rich continue to get richer and the poor get poorer. There is nothing we can do about it,” but I fundamentally disagree. Yes, the rich are getting richer, but we can definitely do something about it.

In contrast to the Tories, a Labour Government would ensure pay ratios of no more than 20:1 in the public sector, for example, and we would introduce an excessive pay levy that would charge a 2.5% levy on earnings above £350,000 a year, which is a huge amount, and 5% on those above £500,000. It is estimated that that alone would raise £1.3 billion a year.

I am sure that the Minister will mention that from 1 July the Government will ensure that companies with more than 250 employees will be obliged to reveal and justify their pay ratios. However, there is no obligation on those companies to take any meaningful action beyond the act of publishing those facts. It is yet more empty rhetoric. How is it helpful just to have the injustice out there, without any action to remedy it?

We need practical, political solutions to curb undeserved excessive pay, and to create mechanisms for better income distribution. That is why we commissioned a report by Prem Sikka, published last year, suggesting a range
of measures that would apply to the more than 7,000 companies in the UK that have more than 250 employees, accounting for more than 10 million workers. Needless to say, we are looking at the report’s recommendations closely, including proposals requiring executive remuneration packages of all large companies to be subject to a binding vote.

That is just one solution to excessive executive pay. Trade unions are the collective voice of workers, and they have to be central to the debate. They are a huge player in reducing inequality in the workplace, but, after years of anti-union policies, the vast majority of workers have absolutely no say over their pay, conditions or hours of work. Protections that existed before under collective bargaining agreements have been completely lost.

Workers deserve a lot more. Pay ratios are just one aspect of tackling pay inequality. That is why a Labour Government would set up a new Department to roll out sectoral collective bargaining—protecting the interests of workers, strengthening trade unions, and introducing new rights and freedoms so that every worker gets the support, security and pay at work that they deserve.

Surely it is time to end the excessive greed. People are feasting on the backs of workers who are struggling to make ends meet, and who have the gut-wrenching feeling that they cannot afford nappies for their children, even though they work more than 40 hours a week. Surely that cannot be right. The Government must act to end that injustice.

10.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing today’s important debate. She has a strong, long-standing record of campaigning on behalf of low-paid workers in the economy. I highlight the constructive way in which she approaches working across the House on some of these issues; I know that she secured an Adjournment debate on whole-company pay policy last July.

Executive salaries and pay ratios are undeniably high. Currently, the ratio of the pay of the average FTSE 100 chief executive officer to that of the average UK employee is around 160:1, based on the mean. The median average is 145:1, but it is important to set current levels of pay in a longer-term context. The data shows that executive pay more than quadrupled from the late 1990s to the early 2010s. Pay ratios increased over that period from 47:1 in 1998 to 132:1 in 2010. However, that has stabilised in the last five to seven years, albeit with minor fluctuations from year to year.

The High Pay Centre, which campaigns against high levels of executive pay, acknowledged in its most recent report that UK executive median pay peaked at £4.2 million in 2013, and is around £3.9 million for the latest reported year. That puts the UK on a par with Germany and only slightly above other major EU countries on executive pay levels, despite our quoted companies generally being much larger. In the US, CEO pay is much higher. Median CEO pay for Standard & Poor’s 500 companies in 2017 was around £9.3 million, giving the US a pay ratio of 399:1.

That sets the context, but it is certainly not grounds for complacency. Shareholders and people in wider society have increasingly been questioning how such wide differentials can be justified, both in terms of individual performance and in relation to company pay policy as a whole. The Government share those concerns.

We do not believe that it is the job of the Government to set company pay levels or impose arbitrary caps. However, it is our position that there must be transparency and accountability in executive pay, and that shareholders must have the information and the powers to challenge unjustified pay in the boardroom. That is why we legislated in 2013 to require listed companies to secure binding shareholder approval for their executive remuneration policies at least once every three years, and to disclose every year the total single figure that each director is paid.

It is also why we are continuing to take steps to force companies to disclose and explain how executive pay is matched by performance, and how it relates to wider employee pay. In particular, we recently introduced a new requirement for companies to disclose and explain every year the ratio of their CEO pay to the average pay of their employees. I am pleased that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden welcomed the legislation, which came into effect at the beginning of this year, meaning that companies will have to report their ratios when they publish annual reports next year.

Pay ratio reporting will, for the first time, show systematically and clearly how pay at the top of quoted companies relates to pay across the rest of the company. Companies will have to report each year the ratio of the CEO’s pay to both the median and the quartile employee pay at the company. The hon. Lady expressed concerns that the pay ratio was being calculated only in relation to the median; in fact, we require pay ratios to be published for the first quartile, the median and the upper quartile. We thought hard about whether to use the median or the mean, and finally decided on the median as a more robust figure. In part, that was a response to the TUC, which argued strongly that we should use the median. In most cases, we use the median because the result is the bigger ratio.

Shareholders, employees and others will get a clear and consistent picture from year to year of how CEO pay relates to pay across the whole company. Companies will need to explain the reasons for any change from previous years, and any pay ratio trend over time. They will also need to explain whether any change is due to a change in the company’s employment model—for example, if the reason was the outsourcing or offshoring of low-paid workers. Critically, the company will have to explain whether, and if so why, it thinks that the ratio is consistent with the pay, reward and progression policies of the company’s UK employees as a whole.

Those pay ratio explanations will be watched closely by investors, who are strongly behind the new pay ratio reporting, as well as by employees and wider society. Any company that puts forward weak or misleading explanations can expect to face significant shareholder and public criticism. As the Financial Times wrote in 2017 when we announced the plans, “a single-figure ratio will attract attention. And that will help investors curb companies’ attempts to inflate chief executive pay—and the pay gap”.

Laura Pidcock]
Pay ratio reporting is part of a wider package of reforms aimed at making a real change to the level of engagement between boardrooms and employees. That package includes an important new provision in the UK corporate governance code for remuneration committees to consider workforce pay alongside executive pay, and to engage with the workforce to explain how executive pay aligns with wider company policy. It is too early to tell what the impact of the new reforms will be. The Government expect companies to respond positively and creatively to the new requirements, recognising that no one size will fit all and that there will be a variety of approaches.

We are already seeing some encouraging progress, on a voluntary basis, this year. For example, Marks & Spencer has agreed that the chair of its business involvement group, which represents the interests of the company’s 81,000 staff, will be invited to attend two boardroom meetings and at least one remuneration committee meeting each year. We must also remember that pay ratios are determined by average pay in the workforce, as well as by pay at the top, so ratios will fall where average pay increases faster than executive pay. In that respect, the Government are taking steps to boost the wages of working people through our industrial strategy to deliver better-paid jobs across the country, our £37 billion productivity investment fund and our increase in R&D investment to 2.4% of GDP by 2027.

We have taken concrete action for low-paid workers by introducing the national living wage, which is on track to hit its target of 60% of median earnings by 2020. Its introduction marked a pay rise for more than a third of workers, and has helped to deliver the fastest wage growth for the lowest-paid in 20 years. In April, we will increase it again to £8.21 by an inflation-busting 4.9%—an increase in earnings of more than £690 a year for a full-time worker, and a total pay rise of £2,750 a year since we first brought it in. Up to 2.4 million workers are estimated to benefit.

Real progress is being made for hard-working people. As a working-class Conservative MP—as a Tory—when I speak about hard-working families and hard-working people, I find that I am accused of referring to higher earners. As somebody who undertook many of the jobs outlined in this debate before I came to Parliament, I actually find it offensive that when I talk about hard-working people, I am accused of not referring to hard-working people separated across our economy.

Kirsty Blackman: I appreciate the Minister’s honesty. The problem is that when the middle-rate income tax threshold goes up, there are Conservatives who make the case that it will improve life for hard-working families, but very few people in the jobs we are talking about are making £43,000 a year. Maybe the Minister needs to tackle the issue with some of her colleagues.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for clarifying her point, but I have to say that it is this Government who have increased the threshold year on year. As a working-class Conservative MP, I am proud to say that I am standing up for hard-working people—and when I talk about hard-working people, I mean people who go out every day to earn a living, no matter what sector they are in or what job they are doing.

The Government have responded to the challenging world of work with plans for the biggest upgrade of workers’ rights in 20 years. In December we published the good work plan, which sets out how we will implement the recommendations of the Taylor review. The plan commits us to introducing a right to request a more predictable and stable contract for all workers and to bringing forward proposals for a single workers’ rights enforcement body in early 2019.

Laura Pidcock: The right to request a contract is often signalled as some kind of big victory, but have not workers always had that right? This is nothing new.

Kelly Tolhurst: We will be making the options for employees clearer. For example, we have already laid statutory instruments to ensure that on their first day, employees are able to get a written statement of their rights. It is about making sure that workers are able to know what rights they have, and that they know that they can ask for that ability.

The Government have also laid legislation that will repeal the so-called Swedish derogation and guarantee agency workers their right to equal pay. After April 2020, agency workers will no longer be able to opt out of their right to equal pay after 12 weeks in the same assignment. In short, we are shining a light on pay at the top and taking action to improve the pay and employment rights of ordinary workers.

I want to touch on a few points made by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden. She rightly raised the issue of diversity on boards and gender balance, which the Government are very concerned about. We have started to see results from work on the gender pay gap: we are now at 17.9%, the lowest figure on record. We are working to improve gender diversity on boards, and we have made great progress. The next target and challenge is black and minority ethnic representation—not just on boards, but in the pipeline and among executives in general. That is one of the policy areas in my portfolio, and I take a lot of interest in it.

The hon. Lady also raised long-term incentive schemes. The data show that long-term incentive schemes linked to valuation and share prices have increased over time, which has contributed to the rise in CEO pay. I absolutely accept her point, but one of the reasons for bringing in pay ratios and specifying in our rules that companies must give an illustration of the breakdown of executive pay ratios and specifying in our rules that companies cannot just be about dealing with a particular company, but that information about those companies will need to decide whether they want to deal with them. Things are moving, and it helps that the issue is on the agenda more widely and that more people are aware of what the big bosses are being paid.

The hon. Lady also raised long-term incentive schemes. The data show that long-term incentive schemes linked to valuation and share prices have increased over time, which has contributed to the rise in CEO pay. I absolutely accept her point, but one of the reasons for bringing in pay ratios and specifying in our rules that companies must give an illustration of the breakdown of executive pay is to make shareholders take a view. It will also provide real information about how that narrative relates to wider pay structures across organisations. We are hoping that the reforms will give shareholders the tools
and powers to hold boards to account, and that they will exercise that right further as the legislation and the changes work their way through.

The hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) raised the issue of pay caps and suggested a 20:1 pay ratio. As I have outlined, the Government do not feel that it is our responsibility, or that we are in a position, to limit what companies can pay their employees. Our role is to ensure that shareholders and stakeholders have the tools to make judgments and hold boards and remuneration committees to account. We believe that the reforms that we have made over time are going some way towards achieving that.

Laura Pidcock: For information, my point about the 20:1 ratio was about the public sector.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for that clarification. However, I point out that a pay ratio of 20:1 could extend to foreign companies bidding for Government contracts, which would raise state aid and World Trade Organisation issues. There are issues with some of the policies and the refining that she may want to clarify further.

I thank again the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden, who has taken the opportunity to bring this debate about company pay ratios to Westminster Hall. They are an important means of shedding light on pay distribution within companies and how that is changing over time. Their publication will spur companies and their remuneration committees to give greater thought and show more sensitivity to how pay in the boardroom aligns with employee pay. Along with other reforms implemented by the Government, they will ensure that the UK remains a world leader in corporate governance and an excellent place in which to work, invest and do business.

I have had many conversations with the hon. Lady, and I thank her for the way in which she approaches these matters. As I said yesterday in the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, these issues will always be under review and we will always be looking at what can be done to improve transparency and clarity so that the spotlight can be shone on organisations. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady constructively on the number of issues that I know she is interested in in this area over the coming months.

Siobhain McDonagh: Can I ask for your clarification, Chair? Do I have a minute, or two, because we have not reached the time limit?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): You can take as many minutes as you feel are appropriate.

10.31 am

Siobhain McDonagh: That’s a very dangerous thing to say!

I thank all hon. Members for taking part in the debate. Although there are not huge numbers of us here, as a Back-Bench Opposition MP, the tools that I have to make small changes are sometimes about shame. The fact that we are here talking about this issue, that the House magazine has taken it up, and that Sainsbury’s has already sent me a very cross word about what was in the article, means that we are having some impact. As a Catholic, I completely understand the role of shame in controlling behaviour!

I come to these things as a patriot. I am the daughter of two people who came here in 1947, fleeing a small island that could not support them and could not feed their families. By dint of their own hard work and labour, they made a good life for themselves. I want that for everybody else. I believe that people should work hard. I believe that work is empowering—not just through someone supporting themselves and their family, but to the human spirit and purpose. I think it can be one of the best cures for mental health problems. To have something to do and to do a job well is a great feeling: I am grateful every day to do this job, because I love it and it leads me to do stuff. That is where I am coming from.

Like all Members here, I have an advice surgery every Friday. People come in and I look at their payslips and I think, “How do they live? How do they support their families and pay their rent? How do they get by?” I see that increasing, and I do not think that is what Britain should be about. We should be about reasonableness and fairness and giving people hope for a better future. I want work to pay, and for so many people who work so hard, who work such antisocial hours, in such poor conditions, that is not happening at the moment. Given where I come from politically, I never thought I would agree with pay ratios, but I am coming to the point of thinking that if other things cannot work, we may need to look at them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered FTSE 100 company pay ratios.

10.34 am

Sitting suspended.
Widowed Parent’s Allowance

10.59 am

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the widowed parent’s allowance.

It is a great pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Moon. I felt compelled to call for this debate about the marital status requirements of widowed parent’s allowance and the need to update the eligibility criteria of its successor, bereavement support payment, following contact by parents affected by the loss of partners. I wish especially to raise the case of Mr Arwel Pritchard and his family.

I have known Arwel, a police officer, since he was in my class in the sixth form at Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor. He met his partner, Donna, whom I also taught, while they both studied there. They were together from then until her untimely death. She leaves two young sons, Cian and Danial. The letter Arwel wrote to me 11 days after Donna’s death is heartbreaking, and his justifiable anger at the callousness with which he and his children have been treated deserves to be put on the record. If I may, I will read some of his words. He wrote:

“On the 20th of May 2018 the mother of my children and my long term partner Donna Claire McClelland passed away following a long illness with breast cancer.

She had been my partner since the time we met in college approximately 24 years ago.

During our time together we got engaged but, due to financial constraints, we did not get married as we had to make the difficult decision either to purchase a home together or get married. Wanting to raise a family, we decided to buy a house in order that we could have a home for our children.

The decision was made to become home owners, and, due to the inflated cost of living and the pay freeze that I received at work, we were never able to afford to be married.

Why am I—a person who has been a lifelong partner to Donna, who has two children with Donna and who has been in a relationship and living with Donna for more years than she lived with her parents—why am I treated as nothing in the eyes of the government?

Why am I treated differently to a person who could afford or was willing to get into debt to be married?

Why are my children not going to receive bereavement benefit for their loss just because their mother and father were not able to get married?

Why is the government discriminating against unmarried people?

Why is the government discriminating against people from different social backgrounds?

Why are children punished financially when one of their parents dies, just because their parents were unable to afford to get married?"

I am proud to be able to put those words on the record.

In many ways, widowed parent’s allowance has been around in one form or another since the inception of the modern welfare state. Society recognises that the death of either parent causes great trauma in a family and seeks to alleviate that distress with financial support. But although the names and conditions of bereavement support payments to widowed families have evolved since the days of Beveridge and Attlee, the requirement for widowed parents to be in a legally licensed relationship—either married or in a civil partnership—is a throwback to the social mores of the 1940s.

The Beveridge report of 1942 acknowledged, in a very different social context, the “problem” of unmarried couples being discriminated against, but none the less recommended limiting widow and guardian benefits to “the legal wife of the dead man.” That principle has remained enshrined in certain aspects of our social security system ever since.

That discrimination on the grounds of marital status was challenged in Northern Ireland by Siobhan McLaughlin, whose appeal was ultimately backed by the UK Supreme Court last summer. Ms McLaughlin’s partner, John Adams, died in 2014. The couple were not married, but they had lived together for 23 years. At the time of his death, the couple had four children, aged between 11 and 19. The late Mr Adams had made sufficient contributions for Ms McLaughlin to be able to claim widowed parent’s allowance had she been married to him. The Supreme Court ruled by a majority of four to one that denying those payments to Ms McLaughlin was incompatible with article 14, in conjunction with article 8, of the European convention on human rights. Its judgment also sets out incompatibility with articles 2 and 3 of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child.

Essentially, the Court reasoned that although the promotion of marriage and civil partnerships as a policy goal is a legitimate aim for any Government, denying Ms McLaughlin and her children the benefit of Mr Adams’s contributions simply because they were not married was not a proportionate means of achieving that policy goal. In other words, privileging marriage and civil partnerships with tax breaks is one thing, but denying money to grieving children simply because they come from unmarried households is quite another. I say “children” quite intentionally.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making a very eloquent case for children who are punished because their parents chose, for whatever reason, not to get married. Does she agree that the entire bereavement support regime introduced in April 2017 punishes all children, because some families with children lose up to £12,000 a year under the new system—working-age parents with children may lose up to £23,500 a year on average—despite this being a contributory benefit?

Liz Saville Roberts: Indeed. It interests me that the Supreme Court judgment makes reference to article 2 of the UN convention on the rights of the child, which decrees non-discrimination in relation to children, and to article 3, which endorses Governments’ working for the best interests of the child first and foremost. Those principles apply not just to the matter we are debating but to other issues.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this important matter. She outlined clearly a case in Northern Ireland. Does she agree that going from having a wage coming into the house to receiving £117 a week is a massive step, and that that needs to continue for more than a year for homes with children? That needs to be reviewed. A year is not long enough for someone to sort out how to cope financially in the long term without their spouse and
how to raise their children alone. This matter is highly important, and I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing it forward.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is evident that this matter raises a whole number of questions over and above the one I am specifically addressing.

I reiterate—I hope I say this regularly during the debate—that I say “children” quite intentionally. The great majority of EU member states make children themselves directly eligible for bereavement benefits up to a certain age. Essentially, bereavement benefits function as a sort of topped-up child benefit for children who have lost a parent and therefore require additional support. It is not, however, within the remit of the Supreme Court to correct primary legislation; that duty lies with us in Parliament.

Let me make it clear that despite the title of the debate, I believe the principle established by the Supreme Court ruling extends beyond the widowed parent’s allowance. We have heard that families in which a spouse has passed away since April 2017 are entitled to bereavement support payment, which replaced widowed parent’s allowance. It is therefore implicit in the Court’s ruling that bereavement support payment, too, ought to be extended to children regardless of their parents’ marital status. After all—I wish to impress this upon everyone present, including the Minister—the key takeaway of that ruling is that refusing to extend payments to the children of unmarried couples is of material detriment to those children and is discriminatory against those children.

In the eyes of the Supreme Court, a policy may offer special treatment to married couples when children are not involved, but it may not do so in relation to a benefit targeted at the needs and wellbeing of children. That is directly relevant to both widowed parent’s allowance and bereavement support payment, as in both instances the wellbeing of the children is the primary purpose of the benefit. That is expressed very convincingly in the Supreme Court judgment. It is not acceptable for the state to discriminate against children who happen to hail from unmarried households—to confer stigmatising status on families as either legitimate or illegitimate in the eyes of their own Government. If the support is there, it must be there for all children.

The Minister may well argue that there are bureaucratic barriers to extending widowed parent’s allowance to the children of unmarried couples. He may suggest that the requirement of a legal union protects widowed parent’s allowance from abuse. In reply, I would highlight the armed forces pension scheme, which successfully utilises allowance from abuse. In reply, I would highlight the requirement of a legal union protects widowed parent’s allowance. It is therefore implicit in the Court’s ruling to correct primary legislation; that duty lies with us in Parliament.

The Minister may highlight that discrimination against the children of unwed couples was debated during the passage of the Pensions Act 2014, I would reply that the legality of the Government’s standpoint is now informed by the Supreme Court’s ruling from last summer. Where Parliament previously debated in a fog of unknown quantities, we now know that the legal union requirement violates the human rights of children born to parents who are neither married nor in a civil partnership. Defenders of restricting payments to married households typically concern themselves with spousal rights, but the crux of this issue can no longer be allowed to rest solely on the rights of a bereaved spouse. Today’s debate is about whether the Government can continue to materially disadvantage children born to unmarried parents.

Household compositions have changed visibly since the widowed mother’s allowance of 1946, and the Supreme Court ruling is a reminder that our social security system must evolve to keep up. According to the Office for National Statistics, cohabiting couple families have been the fastest-growing family demographic across the UK for two decades, and in the past few years, families headed by cohabiting couples have been more prevalent than lone-parent families in the UK. By 2017, 17% of all households with dependent children were headed by a cohabiting couple.

We also know that there is a socioeconomic and geographical element to family composition, and 49% of cohabiting households in Wales are home to dependent children—the highest proportion throughout the UK. Poorer families are more likely to be headed by unmarried parents, and both mothers and fathers in married couples are more than twice as likely to have a degree as their counterparts in cohabiting couples. Children in lower socioeconomic households are therefore disproportionately exposed to bereavement support discrimination of this type, compared with their wealthier counterparts. That is deeply ironic given the Government’s approach to non-means-tested benefits: to those who can afford to marry, they give more, but to those who have less, they seek to justify denying them at the most traumatic time.

When will the Government formally respond to the issues raised in the Supreme Court ruling and in this debate? The Minister said on 5 September last year that there would be a response anon, but a number of months have since passed. If he will not provide a set timetable today for a response, will he explain why? Could the Government use legislative vehicles to make such a change? I think particularly of the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill promoted by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). A private Member’s Bill might well be a vehicle through which to make such a change.

Extending widowed parent’s allowance as well as bereavement support payments was recommended back in March 2016 in a report by the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, “Support for the bereaved”. It outlined, as I have done today and as the Supreme Court did last year, that excluding the children of unmarried couples from bereavement support in the 21st century is both unjust and unjustifiable.

11.12 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I pay tribute to
the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) who is a passionate advocate of this issue, and I thank her for giving me advance notice of the topics she intended to cover so that I could consider seriously the points raised. She gave an impassioned interview on BBC Radio Wales today, and her work in this area is a credit to the campaign she is championing. I also thank other Members who have contributed to this short but important debate.

Bereavement is one of the toughest experiences that people face, particularly with the immediate upheaval. I know that from first-hand experience because I lost my father at an early age. My parents ran their own small business and—this is a sign of times gone by—it was predominantly in my father's name. At the point when grieving should have been the natural process, my mother was required to go back into work and fight the banks to try to keep a roof over our heads, and I was back in school the following lunchtime.

The Government's focus is very much on appropriate and immediate support, and that has been reflected in some of the changes we have made. That is an important focus for the Government, and we spend £464 million a year on various forms of support for those who have been bereaved. Recent changes mean that over the next two years we expect to spend an additional £40 million.

I recognise that the thrust of this debate is to encourage and push for further changes, particularly for children, and we have demonstrated a willingness to do that where appropriate.

Changes to the bereavement system will cost an additional £40 million over those first two years—something we all welcome. As a principle, such support will be easier to claim, and it will provide the immediate support that was very acute on the list of asks in the 2011 consultation—the need for help in those early months is paramount. Such support is now paid in addition to other household income, and it is not taxed, means-tested or applied to the benefit cap. After we listened during the consultation we widened the support available to include anyone of working age, and younger spouses and civil partners without children will now get support.

It also removes the potential trap that stops people being able to move on because if they found a new partner they would lose any support, even if they are still in need of it.

Having listened to the consultation responses we increased the initial lump sum for those with children by an extra £1,500, to recognise that additional need. That support is in addition to the initial sum of £2,500 for those without children, and £3,500 for those with children, and therefore provides 18 months of support, rather than 12. Those without children receive £100 a month, and those with children get £350 a month, for 18 months.

Overall the changes not only reflect that immediate support, and those in receipt of benefits, such as age, gender and other sources of income, as well as how bereavement support payments interact with other benefits. We will also look at outcomes for recipients once bereavement support payments come to an end. At this stage, we do not have a specific timescale for that evaluation, as we must ensure enough time to allow other forms of support fully to bed in.

Let me turn to the thrust of the hon. Lady's intervention and the principle of cohabitees. The question of opening up bereavement payments to cohabitees was debated and decided against in Parliament during the passage of the Pensions Act 2014, which legislated for the introduction of bereavement support payments in the UK. Restricting bereavement payments to claimants who are in a legal union with the deceased has been a feature of bereavement support since the 1920s. That was based on the outdated assumption that someone would rely solely on their spouse for income and would never work themselves.

The concept of a legal union is a constant feature of contributory benefit schemes. It promotes institutions of marriage and civil partnerships by conferring eligibility to state benefits derived from another person's national insurance contributions only on the spouse or civil partner of the person who made the contributions.

Cohabitation is not a straightforward concept and can sometimes be open to interpretation; unlike a legal union, it is not a black-and-white issue. That is partly why it is taking time for us to reflect very carefully. An extension to cohabitees could also trigger multiple claims on behalf of the same deceased person—for example, if the deceased was legally married to one person but cohabiting with another. That has the potential to lead to delays and additional burdens to claimants that are likely to cause distress at a time of bereavement. It is an important factor. I am not saying that the issue is insurmountable, but that is why this is a complex issue to reflect on.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am sure the Minister needs no reminding that the UK Government ratified the UN convention on the rights of the child in 1991, and I am sure that he would therefore share my concern that if discrimination against children is being facilitated on the grounds that it is bureaucratically too difficult to resolve the issue, that is not making the interests of the child a priority.

Justin Tomlinson: We are only five minutes into my response—fear not, there is more to come, and it will cover exactly those points.

After the introduction of the bereavement support payment, a broader point was raised about how and when we will evaluate the effectiveness of that new system. We recognise that, as with many Government changes, we need to listen, learn and act, and that is separate from any legal judgment. We intend to assess the situation once sufficient evidence is available, and we must have enough data to examine fully the continued circumstances of the bereaved once their benefit payments come to an end. We will analyse that information, which will include looking at the characteristics of those in receipt of benefits, such as age, gender and other sources of income, as well as how bereavement support payments interact with other benefits. We will also look at outcomes for recipients once bereavement support payments come to an end.

Liz Saville Roberts: I appreciate the Minister informing us of that, but he has not said whether the Government intend to move on cohabiting couples, and whether—five months down the road—they intend to respond to the Supreme Court judgment, and if so, when. Forgive me, but I feel it is my duty, given the title of the debate, to press those points.
[Justin Tomlinson]

need to act. This is not a black-and-white issue, so we cannot do that within 24 hours. In effect, there are two asks. One is that people want me to do something, and to do something quickly; and that is what I am—

Liz Saville Roberts rose—

Justin Tomlinson: I am coming to the issue raised by the hon. Lady. The second point is that we do recognise the principle in respect of children, which is why, under the bereavement support payment, there is additional money for those with children; that principle is there.

Liz Saville Roberts rose—

Justin Tomlinson: Let me cover a bit more and I will happily take interventions, because we are okay for time.

Last year, the Supreme Court declared that the primary legislation that governs widowed parent’s allowance is incompatible with the principles of human rights law, as it “precludes any entitlement to widowed parent’s allowance by a surviving unmarried partner”.

The courts cannot strike down primary legislation; only Parliament can change primary legislation. Therefore, that ruling does not change the current eligibility rules for receiving bereavement benefits. I am keen to take action, however, in the light of the Supreme Court ruling. I made that very clear in my statement on the Floor of the House, and since then, to help to shape the response—this debate will also be taken into consideration—I have met a number of MPs and campaigners personally. That has been an important part of the process.

However, the issues are complex and there is no quick fix. As Lady Hale herself noted in her judgment:

“It does not follow that the operation of the exclusion of all unmarried couples will always be incompatible. It is not easy to imagine all the possible permutations of parentage which might result in an entitlement to widowed parent’s allowance.”

Crucially, that is not a clear steer—a clear steer equals a much swifter response from us—and we have to take that into consideration; Lady Hale herself acknowledged that. That does not mean that we are pushing this into the long grass. As I confirmed on the Floor of the House and I am hoping to convey here, we are taking it very seriously. There is extensive and comprehensive work to look into it to ensure that we get it right.

To go back to the earlier point, we do not wish to unintentionally cause additional stress where there could be competing people who feel, under the new rules—new potential rules—that they would have the claim. Each in their own right would feel that it should be them; and at a time of bereavement the last thing we want to do is cause undue stress.

Liz Saville Roberts: I remind the Minister that virtually every other European state treats the children as eligible, in which instance the legality and licence of the relationship between the parents is inconsequential. I wonder whether the Minister would move to support such a principle, but none the less I would greatly appreciate some sense of the timeframe. I understand his point that the matter is complex and thus deserves a thorough response, but I would press him to give an indication of when he is likely to come back.

Justin Tomlinson: In terms of the way other European countries do this, that is part of our work, because we are looking at what has worked, what the potential unintended consequences are and what can be done to mediate that. That is shaping much of the work. I absolutely understand why the hon. Lady would love me to be able to give a specific timeframe, but I cannot do so, other than to say that it is an absolute priority for us to do this and to do it thoroughly and properly and to avoid unintended consequences. We absolutely recognise the importance of this.

Patricia Gibson: I am gratified by what I think the Minister said, which is that eligibility based on marital status cannot be determined purely on the basis of convenience. I am glad that he seems to have said that, but like the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), I ask him to assure the House right now that the children will be at the heart of any way forward that the Government embark on.

Justin Tomlinson: Many of the things that we do as a Government rightly recognise the importance of children. As the state, we have a duty of care to ensure that all children, regardless of background and circumstances, have the opportunity to unlock their full potential. Whichever political side they are on, every individual Member would echo that, in their own terms.

As I said, we have recognised the importance of the hearing. We are keen to do this thoroughly. We are taking it very seriously. We wish to do it as swiftly as possible, but it has to be done absolutely right. Let me give further reassurance. Although there is no one simple or obvious solution following the declaration of incompatibility, the officials are working very carefully, and ultimately I will return with potential solutions. This must go through the House’s legislative process, so all Members will have further opportunities to shape what we then believe would be the right conclusion. We are working very closely with our counterparts in Northern Ireland, recognising that the specific case was from there. But this must be done very thoroughly.

In conclusion, we are carefully considering the McLaughlin court ruling. We recognise that we currently have incompatible law on the statute books, and we are actively considering all options. With the introduction of the bereavement support payment, we have demonstrated that we will seek to make sensible and positive changes to target support at those most in need.

It is very clear that the hon. Members present feel strongly that the emphasis has to be on the children; I have heard that loud and clear. As I said, it has always been our intention to assess the impact of the bereavement support payment, which we will do once we have sufficient data. We are committed to supporting the bereaved and ensuring that they receive the right support at a difficult time. I echo my tribute to the hon. Members who care so passionately about this subject. It is a real priority for the Government and it is one, and as we make progress I will be very happy to meet again, individually, those who are interested, in order to update them on the work. I want to be inclusive, because we all want the
right outcomes. It is just that the issue is complex. There
was not a clear steer, which meant that there could not
be a quick fix, but the issue is a genuine, real priority for
us.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am
Sitting suspended.

Balanced Budget Rule

[GRAHAM STRINGER in the Chair]

2.30 pm
Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to
move,

That this House has considered the balanced budget rule.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,
Mr Stringer. I am extremely pleased to have secured this
debate to consider an issue that has slipped down the
agenda in recent years, namely that of fiscal responsibility
and the actions the state can take in order to uphold
and, in some cases, guarantee it.

I am delighted to see so many right hon. Members
and hon. Members here today. It is packed to the rafters
and standing room only, which demonstrates the level
of interest in the subject. I hope that, by holding such
debates in Westminster Hall, and by dragging so many
hon. Members to them to volunteer contributions, we
can slowly raise this important issue back up the agenda
and draw attention to it.

The particular issue I want to discuss is the principle
of the United Kingdom adopting a balanced budget
rule as a way to improve its finances, and the underlying
responsibility of Members in this place to ensure that
the country pays its way in the future. The idea, which
though simple is not universally liked, is that over an
appointed period, within an agreed timeline, Governments
should follow the novel concept of living within their
means and not spend more than they can afford. Crucially,
that commitment goes beyond words and there should
be consequences if there is a failure to adhere to it.

To some, that is dramatic news; to others, such as
myself, it just makes sense that Governments should not
seek to balance the books on the back of the nation’s
children and grandchildren. The principle of the never-never
is, with appropriate structuring, just as apt for the
Exchequer as it is for the average household in towns
such as Dronfield, Eckington, Clay Cross and Killamarsh
in my North East Derbyshire constituency.

It was James Madison, one of the US founding
fathers, who said in 1790 that he went

“on the principle that a Public Debt is a Public curse.”

We would do well to take heed of such sentiments.

I have prepared a long speech, because I did not think
that so many Members would be here. Before I begin, I
will frame the discussion to ensure that the next few
minutes can be constructive and useful. The debate
could easily, quickly and seamlessly descend into the
usual tit-for-tat and back-and-forth on the current state
of our national finances, who got us to where we are
and why we are there. I am sure that that may happen
during the debate. I will say a few words about that in a
moment, but I hope we will not dwell on it too much.
The idea is to take a broader and longer-term look at
where we are, and how we ensure that we leave our
country safer, more secure and more resilient than we
found it. That resilience should stretch to the nation’s
finances as much as it does to its borders and national
security.

I declare this debate, in so far as I am able, a Brexit-free
zone. That is not because Brexit will not have repercussions
or implications for the issue at hand, because it blatantly
will, given that the Government’s deficit elimination target has been revised in recent years. I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) will still have a speech to make after those comments. This debate is about a time beyond Brexit, if we can possibly imagine such a nirvana, and about the day when headlines talk about police, health and education again, rather than backstops, Juncker and tariffs. I have been in this place less than two years, and I would say that at least 90% of what we talk about is Brexit. It sucks the oxygen out of the room, and I say that as committed Brexiteer. It also looks likely to continue to do so for much of the next year, so I hope that for the next few minutes we can try to avoid it.

My proposition is simple: that the United Kingdom considers over the long term the adoption of the balanced budget rule, set in statute, which requires Government to spend only as much as they raise, over a set agreed period, and that there will be consequences if they fail to do that. That would not be an aim or an ambition, but a hard rule, which would be flexible only inasmuch as anything can be flexible when it is set down in law. To be provocative, if we were so minded we might even consider tying any attempt to change future legislation—presumably by a spendthrift Government eager to give out sweets or goodies to buy votes—to a referendum of the people themselves, given that we have become so adept at referendums in recent years. That would certainly focus minds.

What is the point of legislating on this issue? First, we should all have a moral problem with excessive Government debt. The United Kingdom’s general Government gross debt in September 2018 was, according to the Office for National Statistics, about £1.8 trillion, which is equivalent to about 85% of our country’s GDP. Last year we borrowed, and therefore added to that figure, about £40 billion. In the last couple of decades, our debt as a proportion of GDP has risen from approximately 40% to more than 80%. Those may be just numbers, but they have real-life and real-world implications.

I acknowledge the challenges that the Government have had in trying to get the country’s deficit under control. My party remains resolutely of the view that the Administration prior to 2010 both mismanaged the country’s finances and failed to prepare for the inevitable recession, which could not be avoided given that mere mortals cannot abolish the cycle of boom and bust, and given the well-recited failure to mend the roof when the sun was shining. I support the Government’s deficit strategy and the work they continue to do to manage it down. It has proved a difficult issue to resolve, but we should acknowledge the important milestone that we hit this year, which is that debt as a proportion of GDP is falling for the first time in many years.

Even with the acknowledgement of the good work that has been and continues to be done, the reality is that we are going to run a deficit for a good number of years to come. Even when we eliminate that deficit, which I hope will be as soon as possible, we are merely returning to a place that stops us piling on any more problems for our children and grandchildren, without really having a way to cut down the problem that has already been created in absolute terms. What is the long-term strategy for cutting that debt pile in absolute rather than relative terms? How do we avoid the current position becoming the baseline and the place we start from when the next recession comes? That place would, by default, reduce our firepower to deal with those hard times.

It is worth dwelling on the moral case for not running a deficit and for keeping debt low. The debt that we run up, for whatever good or bad reason, needs to be paid back, and if we cannot pay it back, we need to service it or pay for it. That limits the handroom of future generations to make decisions about what they spend their taxes on, because some of their taxes will go on servicing the debt. It mandates that spending that benefits one generation will be dealt with by another, which is an intergenerational unfairness that we should reflect on much more deeply than we do today, as ever-eager politicians dream up another opportunity to spend.

Reducing our firepower or fiscal space in the event of a recession is the worst kind of lack of planning, and one that will hamstring our ability to pull ourselves out of those recessions, when they inevitably come. As Ryan Bourne of the Cato Institute pointed out in his excellent recent paper on the subject, at least some of the literature that has reviewed the issue highlights that when Government debt gets too high for too long, it tends to reduce growth rates overall, meaning less economic activity, less growth and less prosperity in the long run. [ Interruption. ]

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the House. We will recommence in 15 minutes.

2.37 pm
Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

2.59 pm
On resuming—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Sorry about that. I had been told there was definitely a second vote, which there clearly was not. I call Mr Lee Rowley.

Lee Rowley: Before we went to vote I was talking about the moral case for low debt and ensuring that the servicing of that debt was as minimal as possible, to retain and support our ability to ensure economic activity in the future. It was not for nothing that Herbert Hoover intoned sarcastically:

“Blessed are the young, for they shall inherit the national debt.”

In this context, perhaps we can bestow a few less blessings on them in the future.

Putting aside the morality of debt, the key issue, which should drive all politicians regarding the accretion of Government debt, is the year-on-year cost of servicing and holding it, as mentioned earlier. The proponents of unfunded spending may highlight how the markets are not that concerned with relatively high borrowing so long as it can be funded. That may be the case. Let us hope, for all of our sakes, that we do not enter a period of high interest rates in the coming decades when national debt is to be rolled over.

The opportunity cost of that funding, on an ongoing basis, is much less understood in this place than in public discourse. It comprises a tax, year on year, on
today’s generation for yesterday’s spending. Unlike the total debt to GDP ratio, which has oscillated wildly in the last century due to wartime spending, the cost of servicing the UK’s debt has been on an upward trajectory for the last century. Adjusted for inflation, the cost of servicing that debt has risen from an average of £12 billion per annum between 1900 and 1960 to nearly £30 billion at the turn of the 21st century. Since 2009, that average has hit £43 billion every year. In total, since 1900 the UK has spent something like £2.5 trillion just on servicing its debt. About half of that has been spent since I was born—I still like to think of myself as being relatively young.

The bad news is not likely to stop there. With the continuing running of deficits until well into the 2020s, the annual cost of servicing that debt is projected by the Office for Budget Responsibility to hit more than £50 billion by the start of the next decade. In this Parliament alone, debt servicing costs are projected to be about a quarter of a trillion pounds over the five years. The sums are huge and growing. They represent a significant opportunity cost to the UK as a whole.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. To put it into sharp focus, does he share my concern that the annual cost of servicing the United Kingdom’s national debt is more than we spend on schools? As a matter of morality, we need to keep debt under control so that we can truly allocate resources where they are most valued.

Lee Rowley: I could not concur more with my hon. Friend, as I will address in my next paragraph. Putting this into context, about 8% of all current Government spending is diverted towards debt servicing. In 2015, that made interest payments the joint fourth largest proportion of spending by the UK after health and welfare, and on a par with defence. Spending on education, the police and transport pales in comparison with the budget allocated to debt interest. That budget could be used, as my hon. Friend has just outlined, for myriad other more socially useful activities, such as paying for a hospital to be built every four days, or for approximately 2,500 nurses, police or teachers to be hired every day throughout the year. For those of us with a more centre-right political outlook, the £45 billion spent on interest costs in 2015 could even have been used to reduce the size of the state through tax cuts, perhaps as large as 8% or 9% in the standard rate of income tax. If the populace actually knew that such a significant chunk of the taxes they paid every year was being used to pay for spending chalked up 20, 30 or 50 years ago, would they be content doing the same or worse for their children, given the sacrifices and opportunity costs involved?

We know what the problem is, so why do we not just do something about it? Why do we need a legislative solution for this issue? The problem is that we as a country are not that good at stopping adding to our debt. Our Labour friends—who have temporarily deserted the Chamber—have a tendency to spend money without a huge amount of regard for the implications. My party usually ends up having to clean up the mess. Even on my side, there are not insignificant number of people who cannot resist the temptation to spend when it comes down to it.

Our parliamentary system and representative democracy are excellent at pushing the cause of individual spending requirements, many of which, I do not contest, are no doubt noble. Yet there are few people who will exercise proper restraint or promote proper fiscal responsibility to ensure that all of these myriad pots of money are truly paid for. It is always tomorrow’s problem. Mañana, mañana, as they say. The numbers show just that: over the last century, the United Kingdom has consistently increased its national debt and its deficit spending. Both in absolute terms and as a proportion of GDP, the UK’s debt burden has grown significantly since the turn of the 20th century. The recent political consensus in the UK demonstrated a clear disregard—if we are honest—for the consequences of deficit spending.

Prior to the second world war, deficit spending tended to be closely correlated with war and national defence. In more than half the years between 1900 and 1939, the UK ran an absolute surplus, including during much of the late 1920s, during economic crisis. Since 1945, however, the achievement of a surplus in the UK’s national spending has been relatively rare. Only 13 out of 71 years saw the deficit being reduced, and on only two separate occasions—the late 1980s and the late 1990s—has the UK run surpluses for more than a couple of years at a time.

If all that sounds like one long criticism, it is not intended that way. It is just a statement of fact. Whether poverty or plenty, feast or famine, there is one almost universal constant: the Government spend more than they take in. That is not unique to the United Kingdom, but a feature of western democracy: red ink reigns supreme. The main variable in western liberal democracies is whether they overspend by a little or a lot. France has never run a Government surplus as a proportion of GDP since the 1970s, nor has Italy. The United States has managed to do so only once since 1960. Even Canada, one of the more enlightened in tackling public debt, has only managed to run surpluses in less than one third of financial years since the 1970s. The Maastricht protocol on excessive debt procedure says that countries should not exceed a 3% borrowing ceiling. Just think on that for a moment: there is a protocol that automatically sets an expectation of overspending—just that it is not excessive. And we wonder why debt has significantly increased in most western democracies over the past 30 years. There is an urgent requirement, over the long term, to address this inherent deficit bias in democracies.

The idea that we need to take more drastic legislative solutions is not that new; it is just that we have never properly applied it to national spending before. Sure, the Government have their charter of budget responsibility and an equivalent office creating the data and watching what is happening. Yet the charter requires people only to identify that they are changing policy. It does not really hold people to account or limit them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On changing policy, I am very aware of where we are at this moment in time. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a post-Brexit economy will provide an incredible opportunity to expand and invest, that the Government must be prepared to invest in our own people, and that if we must borrow to do so, it must be done in a reasonable and controlled fashion? As he has said, we must be prepared to back our own people. I hope that the Minister will respond
positively and say that he will ensure that there will be Government investment in our businesses. That is very important.

Lee Rowley: I completely agree that we have a big job to do after Brexit, in terms of ensuring that our infrastructure works and that our country is well prepared for the future and has the necessary flexibility to take the opportunities that will come our way in the coming decades. If, from a Government perspective, we need to spend in order to do that, we should do so. I am not here to disregard Government spending—it is a force for good. However, it has to be done properly, it must have a clear outcome and we have to pay for it.

3.9 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.21 pm

On resuming—

Lee Rowley: I was talking about how legislative solutions are applied, what is already in place and the charter for budget responsibility. My point was that in non-financial areas of Government activity, we are happy to bind ourselves to long-term targets, because there is the political will. The most obvious instance in recent years was the Climate Change Act 2008, which created an explicit legal requirement for future Governments to reduce greenhouse gases by 80%. If a political consensus can be built for protecting the country against such a danger to our children, why cannot the same be done to prevent economic problems for future decades?

That is where a balanced budget rule could really make a difference, with a legislative requirement to balance our budget over a period, minimising the growth of the debt to be left for following generations to deal with. It is not all that innovative. The OECD estimates that about 100 countries have some kind of fiscal limiting framework. Those can be voluntary or compulsory, and they vary in strictness and the degree to which they are adhered to. None is perfect, but it is at least arguable that over time the focus on fiscal rectitude focuses minds and attention on delivering better outcomes.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a budget rule, and the best known, is Chile’s. In the 2000s, Chile adopted a rule requiring structural surpluses to be run, so that the national debt could be reduced significantly. Broadly, under the structure it created, an estimate was made of the country’s economic potential over future years, and spending was allowed only to match the anticipated growth and revenue.

What was the result? There was a sharp reduction in net debt, surpluses as high as 8% in the years leading up to the economic crisis, and the upgrading of the country’s credit rating. Admittedly, some of that was possibly because of the commodity boom. None the less, the rule permitting appropriate balance to be given to both revenue and spending was important. Even today, after the rule has been challenged and battered a bit more through experience and difficulty, Chile’s debt remains significantly below that of many other countries. It is about 20% of GDP, rather than the 80% that we are grappling with.

Switzerland is another example where a legislative solution has focused minds and improved overall fiscal discipline. The Swiss “debt brake” was introduced in 2001, having been approved in a referendum—something that that country is wont to use for important national policy questions. Integration into the national constitution followed. There is a requirement for structural balanced budgets, through the capping of annual spending with tax revenues, plus or minus some flexibility. Again, the change had a significant impact. A nation whose debt GDP ratio had significantly increased—from around 15% of GDP in the early 1990s to 45% at the time of the referendum—saw a rapid reduction over the succeeding years. Debt to GDP is now about 25%, and is projected to fall.

Switzerland and Chile are not alone. Sweden is another country that learned from overspending, this time in the 1990s, and it has been relatively successful at maintaining surpluses. The Germans have introduced in their constitution a cap of 0.35% on structural deficits. It is not exactly a surplus, but it is a way to prevent large consistent deficits. Other examples that the OECD has highlighted include Argentina, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Hong Kong and the Netherlands, although their arrangements vary with respect to their legislative teeth and their success. Even the French, who have not been able to balance a budget for decades, have made tentative steps in that direction, with the transposition of their fiscal compact in 2012. The fact that that has not gone anywhere is a topic for another conversation, but at least they were moving in that direction for a time.

Of course, legislation is not the only solution, and it does not necessarily guarantee a positive outcome against politicians determined to get around it. The United States’ periodic fights over the debt ceiling—a mechanism that was designed to stop overspending—always have one outcome. In the 1980s, the attempts in the States to balance the federal budget under the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act, through mandatory sequesters—automatic cuts in spending in the event that politicians could not agree a budget that would fit—were unsuccessful, as resets and changes occurred when the going got tough. Nothing is infallible if we do not want it to be. Creative accounting, redefinition of spending as investment or capital, direct appeals and canny political manoeuvring can all undermine fiscal responsibility if politicians want that to happen.

I do not argue that a balanced budget rule would be a panacea. In Chile in recent years, there have been issues when estimates have not been realised and projections have been undershot. Switzerland also exempts elements of spending, such as social services, from the rules. If people want to get around this stuff they will, and no Parliament can truly bind the hands of a future one. Yet the idea of fiscal responsibility being formally codified beyond aspirations that can be amended by mere ministerial statements creates an impetus and a legal framework that focuses the political mind and public discourse on ensuring that we do something as basic as spending only as much as we raise.

What kinds of solutions should we consider? That depends on the political will and the desire to focus on the issue at hand. First, it is right to fix our immediate problem and finish the job of eliminating the deficit. I support what the Government are doing about that and want to give them gentle encouragement to accelerate it
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where possible. That is the first step. There is the potential to legislate in the future once we have reached a surplus, or perhaps even when the point is reached at which the deficit is relatively small, which we are starting to get to.

There are various options. We could try to act voluntarily. That, to some extent, is what we have done already, and it is absolutely better than nothing, but we can in truth see that that approach has shortcomings—for some of which there are good reasons. I shall not provide a running commentary on Government policy, which, as I have said, has been positive overall. Plans are moved, for good and bad reasons. The conveyor belt of politicians calling for more spending and pushing their own hobbyhorses—holding Westminster Hall debates—continues. Many such ideas have merit and value, but we have effectively created a pressure cooker in Parliaments such as ours, with a desire just to ask for more and do more, and seek out new ways to spend money on fixes. When one parliamentarian does it, others follow suit. We remain addicted to spending and voluntarism goes only so far.

How, then, can we formalise the approach I am outlining? We could, as happens in the United States, make it a formal requirement to vote on increasing debt when it approaches established ceilings, or when there is a question of its exceeding them. The Government debt is fixed and capped and politicians have to make a clear decision in front of their electorate to change it. That is useful but probably, as in the US, it would not focus the minds of politicians too much. Often people’s eyes glaze over when they see big numbers. That is one of the reasons why my party should stop trying to win the public services spending arms race with the spendthrifts on the Opposition Benches and focus instead on what the money is actually doing to improve outcomes. A debt ceiling has limitations, but it would send a clear signal.

Taking things further, we could establish a simple balanced budget rule that we would not spend more than we took in over a defined year or over the course of a few years. That could be done through adept forward estimating or by linking spending to the trajectory of past revenue growth. The Government would have a formal responsibility not to overspend, and to set out their plans clearly, on a short-term basis, showing how they intended to avoid overspending. In some ways, that would be the simplest solution—a clear understandable position and a clear understandable requirement to ensure that the budget is balanced. It might also improve public understanding of and support for the proposal.

Such rules, however, are often clunky and inflexible. Absolute requirements to budget on an annual or near-annual basis will significantly reduce headroom and the flexibility to deal with short-term shocks and recessions when there is at least an arguable case for fiscal stimulus in certain circumstances. That is probably one reason why such strict rules do not apply in many places around the world.

Alternatively, we could think about a more flexible approach that achieves the overall objectives, but that relies more heavily on estimating being correct, and on the Government not delaying hard decisions through a lack of political will. The requirement to balance a budget over an economic cycle would seem a strong starting point, although identifying the start and end point of that cycle will be difficult and reliant on guesswork that would no doubt not be correct in a number of cases.

Flexibility could be introduced through various mechanisms. For example, the Swiss debt brake accepts that at times the Government will need to amend their approach due to external factors. To accommodate that, it applies a model of debits and credits, so if a Government fail to achieve a balanced budget in one year, they carry over that failure to another year through a fiscal debit that needs to be made up. Similarly, fiscal credits can be built up in a bank in readiness for future problems. To avoid future debts being run up too heavily, once debits exceed 6% of total Government spending, an automatic requirement kicks in to eliminate them within three years. An exceptional rule also applies so that in times of genuine emergency or need, both Houses of the Swiss Parliament can approve spending on an exceptional basis that breaks the rules. Even then, however, the Swiss have found a way to accommodate that, and automatic amortisation of that exceptional spending must be dealt with within six years.

The challenge of the Swiss model is its relative complexity—try explaining that down the pub after a few pints or during hustings at the next election—but its beauty is that bygones cannot be bygones, which is often the flaw in attempts to regulate deficit spending and debt growth. If Chile gets its estimates wrong, it tries harder next time. If the Swiss get them wrong, they have to find a way to compensate, and all the while the cost of servicing debt remains low and does not threaten the financial health of the next generation.

Despite Brexit sucking the oxygen out of the room, and despite the challenges that the UK faces in the coming years—including from that B-word—we have to make a choice. The Government have been consistent and clear that they believe in fiscal responsibility and discipline. We have had success in restoring the UK’s financial health after such difficult times 10 years ago, and the trajectory continues—albeit a little slowly for my liking—to get us back to balance. Nevertheless, we need to talk about what we do when we get there. As some politicians occasionally point out, dealing with the deficit does not mean that we have dealt with the debt, and the conversation needs to move on to that.

Balanced budgets, fiscal rules and the promotion of fiscal discipline will be the weapons and constraints—perhaps we could call them the backstoppers—for when the next generation of politicians, whoever they are, are tempted to spend, spend and spend again. Indeed, some of the current generation are quite tempted to do that at the moment. Having balanced budget rules and the codification of fiscal discipline is one way to do that. It is not a perfect solution, but the status quo is far from perfect in this regard. Perhaps as a nation we should start to think more about how we create frameworks for future success, and how we address the fundamental challenge in western democracies of celebrating the money we want to spend—whether necessary and virtuous, or inefficient and virtue signalling—while not paying sufficient attention to the cost of it all. We cannot and must not keep spending today on the backs of our kids and grandkids tomorrow. If politicians are not willing voluntarily to adopt restraint, perhaps it is time to harden our resolve.
3.33 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to take part in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) on securing this debate, not least because we all want the debt, deficit and borrowing to come down to sustainable levels—there is no disagreement about that objective. At the end of his speech, he spoke about flexibility and not harking back to the debates of 10 years ago. We supported the New Zealand model that allows for maximum flexibility for a shock, while trying to reduce the debt and deficit, and we still think it has considerable merit.

While not wishing to be at all partisan, I must take issue with the hon. Gentleman. I would not characterise them as being a burden on, and it is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire said, we have seen this in the past—we can have a balanced budget over the economic cycle. I am long enough in the tooth to remember my friends in the British Labour party changing the start and end dates of the economic cycle to make the numbers fit. It was not very credible, so I would rule that out, however superficially appealing.

All those mechanisms—all of them—depend on accurate forecasts. If there is optimism bias, our fiscal numbers and tax yield will be lower than anticipated on day one. We have seen, year after year, and even with substantial depreciation of sterling, that the contribution of trade to GDP growth was far lower than expected, or even zero or negative.

Secondly, it requires those doing the forecast to have comprehensive access to all of the information. The Office for Budget Responsibility has told us that it did not have access to some Government policy changes before it produced its report in advance of the Budget, and even the most recent Red Books make precisely no consideration of the impact of Brexit on the fiscal numbers—zero—or of the impact of a reduction in immigration, which could have a profound impact on GDP growth and tax yield.

We then have the issue of having to identify in advance—although it is impossible to do so, particularly in the case of certain sorts of external shocks—the precise implications for the fiscal numbers and revenue yield of both cyclical and structural flaws in the economy.

I say to the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire that we all want to see the debt come down, the deficit come down and borrowing come down—all of us want to see that. However, in addition we all want to maintain investment and to ensure that we do not punish those with least, who are dependent on public expenditure.

I also say to the hon. Gentleman, keep pushing. Let us see if we can get an answer from the Minister, and let us see if a flash of inspiration comes over all our heads at some point. If he can identify solutions to those problems—the optimism bias, the lack of information from the forecasters or to the forecasters, and information in advance about the precise impact of both a cyclical and a structural change to the economy—I suspect that I will be the first one to put him up for a Nobel prize for economics. However, in the absence of answers to those questions, I suspect that this issue will remain something that we will have to work at and something that is unlikely to be implemented, or at least implemented quickly.

3.41 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and it is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I congratulate

undesirable. We can also allow automatic stabilisers to take their course. That normally happens for a good reason, but the budget rule is then breached. We could introduce a corollary to the Bank of England failing to meet the inflation target, with some kind of letter or report to the House of Commons. If that happened too often, it would become rather meaningless; even worse, it could become a fiscal event in its own right. Watch how the markets would respond to that, rather than a sensible automatic implementation of the automatic stabilisers.

To avoid such difficulties—as the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire said, we have seen this in the past—we can have a balanced budget over the economic cycle. I am long enough in the tooth to remember my friends in the British Labour party changing the start and end dates of the economic cycle to make the numbers fit. It was not very credible, so I would rule that out, however superficially appealing.

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3.41 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and it is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I congratulate
my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) on securing it. It is a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) in Westminster Hall. As I go through my speech, no doubt he will not agree with the things I say, but that aside, I have tremendous respect for him.

The balanced budget rule is an important one, as it takes seriously the principle of responsible spending and enshrines it in a fiscal policy. It forces Governments to think through their spending priorities and decisions, and it contributes to more open, transparent and affordable budgeting. Countries across the world have adopted this approach, and with the exception of periods of war, economic crisis or natural disaster, they have maintained that decision.

Of course, there are different types of balanced budget rule and some Governments allow for different types of spending, or adjust their spending, depending on where they are in the economic cycle. When designing such rules, it is key that they are simple enough to be understood, followed and monitored, but flexible enough to be durable against the unforeseen economic shocks that can temporarily derail attempts to meet the goal. Indeed, if there is any short-term economic shock to the United Kingdom from, say, leaving the European Union, the Government should have the space to cut taxes in order to boost growth. The balanced budget rule also prevents profligacy, which Governments may choose to deploy to obtain votes.

One of the things that a balanced budget rule does help to do is to reduce waste. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire referred to cheap political points, but some of the numbers that I am about to give are by no means cheap. I am referring, of course, to the last Labour Government. Although I will not give an exhaustive list of what they did, I will mention just a few things: £26 billion wasted on computer blunders; £18 billion wasted on ID cards; and £50 million wasted on an Assets Recovery Agency that only recovered £8 million in assets. The list goes on, and of course vanity projects can happen on either side of the political argument and under either party, so at all times there must be checks and balances.

However, incompetence also has a lot to answer for and I believe that the balanced budget rule would, more than our current system, prevent incompetence. Under the last Labour Government, Gordon Brown described himself as the “Iron Chancellor”. Well, he may have known a lot about iron, but he did not know much about gold, given the fact that he sold it at the worst possible time, wasting billions.

The last Labour Government talked about benefits, as does the Labour party now. Of course, as the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) said, people who do not have an income of their own and rely on the Government for benefits deserve to be supported. Of course, there are different types of benefits that the Labour Government would have thought that Labour would by now have learned that lesson, but it has not. Instead, hundreds of billions of pounds of unfunded spending commitments are being made by the Opposition, even now.

My colleagues have worked hard to provide the successes in our economy today, but I urge them and the Minister to look at balancing the books with a balanced budget rule.

3.45 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to say a few words in this debate, Mr Stringer, and I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) on securing it.

This is such an important issue, yet looking around this Chamber—in which there are only a few people—we could be forgiven for thinking that it is somehow a dry, bookish or niche issue. However, the reality is that what Governments of all stripes do in respect of the public finances resonates in people’s lives, including the lives of people who might be some of the most vulnerable in our community. If we lose control of the public finances, it is not the rich and the powerful who suffer, but the poor, the sick and the vulnerable. That is why it is so important that we engage with this issue, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on doing so.

However, part of the problem with discussing this issue is that we as a political generation fail to communicate about it properly. That is because if people are anything like me, once a figure gets above, say, £50 million or so, it just sounds like a very big number, and what we sometimes fail to do is to put these figures in context. How many Members of Parliament would be able to tell people the total budget that we spend every year as a nation? I suspect fewer than half. As a matter of fact, it is something in the region of £840 billion. That is an important figure to keep in mind, because it puts in context what has happened to our national debt over the last 10 years. Back in 2007, our total national debt—the total pile that we had to service as a nation—was about £500 billion or so. Now it is £1.8 trillion, and as my hon. Friend indicated that debt burden has to be serviced in some way.

Again, it is all very well to say, “Oh well, it costs roughly £50 billion a year to service that debt pile”, but that is a meaningless figure unless we place it in some sort of context. As has already been said, that sum is higher than the total schools budget. People like me, who represent places like Cheltenham, go and speak to headteachers about the pressures they face in their schools, where they might be looking to increase the high needs budget, which is about £6 billion. However, the reality is that we spend about eight times more on debt interest than we do on high needs funding. That is a difficult decision that
The reason this issue is important is because it has an impact on people's lives. Here are two things that I think are axiomatic. First, there is no national security without economic security. In other words, unless we live within our means, we cannot be sure that our military and indeed our intelligence agencies, such as GCHQ, which is in my constituency, can rely on the knowledge that they will have the resources they need to keep our country safe into the future. Secondly, we cannot have economic security without fiscal security. In other words, unless we keep control of our finances, when economic shocks come, which they will, the nation will be ill-prepared to deal with them. Put bluntly, the cupboard will be bare.

That is precisely what happened in Greece. That nation had a debt to GDP ratio of about 90% to 100%, and when the storm came it was unable to deal with it. As a result, as I indicated before, it was the poor, the sick and the vulnerable who suffered, with Greece's equivalent of NHS funding being slashed by half. The reason why that is so sobering is that the UK's debt to GDP ratio is in the high 80s; it is not a million miles away from where Greece was 10 years or so ago. That is an important point to raise, and as a political group we need to do better in explaining its impact, but I say respectfully to the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) that the Opposition need to be straight with people as well. It is easy enough to say, "We are going to spend £1 trillion", but in the same sentence, Labour ought to explain the costs that will entail each and every year so that people can understand what that offer means.

The reality is that if Labour wants to spend another £1 trillion, that is absolutely fine for my generation—no doubt there will be more money for the NHS, and so on and so forth—but the next generation will suffer, because before they can pay for a single soldier, nurse, doctor or teacher, they will have to pay vastly more in debt interest. If that argument is made, people can make their choices, but everyone who does so has to be straight with the British people. I regret to say that that has not always been quite as transparent as it might be. There is a moral case for living within our means, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) made an erudite speech, especially in his description of the difficulties of forecasting when trying to get a balanced budget. He is absolutely right that past performances have shown how difficult it is to make accurate forecasts, and about how that will impact on this idea in its entirety. He referred to the New Zealand model, and we have also heard about models from the United States, Canada and Chile, as well as Greece, mentioned by the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). There are lots of models and lots of places we could look to when considering this idea, but none seems to have the absolute answer.

The hon. Gentleman spoke briefly—for which I am grateful—but appositely. I have not forgotten the hon. Member for Southport (Damien Moore), but as he mainly went on the attack against the Opposition, I will leave it to the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) to sum up what he said.

The Tories keep imposing deadlines for balancing budgets which they are missing. As far as the Scottish National party is concerned, their only interest is ideological cuts. Those cuts have not taken full account of circumstances at any given time, and in order to balance the budget, it has been impossible not to hurt those people whom some Members have already mentioned as needing the most from the public purse.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that wages have still not recovered to pre-crisis levels, and annual earnings are more than 3% lower than in 2008, with millennials the worst hit. Median earnings fell to £23,327 last year, 3.2% lower than in 2008, when the average wage was £24,088. People in their 20s and 30s have taken the biggest hit: those aged 30 to 39 have seen their earnings fall by 7.2%, to an average of £26,442, but I am not going to go on ceaselessly producing numbers. My children are affected by what has happened. It has not been a good idea to balance the budget on the backs of those people, and it is even more difficult for the Government when folk like Jonathan Cribb, a senior economist at the IFS, and Paul Johnson, director of the IFS, say as they did last year:

"The UK economy has broken record after record, and not generally in a good way: record low earnings growth, record low interest rates, record low productivity growth, record public borrowing followed by record cuts in public spending."

If the UK Government genuinely wanted a balanced budget, they would not be giving a major tax cut to high-income earners. In sharp contrast with the Scottish Government, who are helping those on low and modest incomes, the Tory Budget gave a tax cut to the better off: it gave basic rate taxpayers £21 a year, compared with £156 for those on higher rates. Where the SNP has
powers over tax in Scotland, it has introduced a progressive tax system, and 70% of all income tax payers will pay less tax this year on a given income than they did in 2017-18. If that were carried out across the UK, that surely would be something.

Scotland continues to have the fairest income tax of anywhere in the UK, with 55% of taxpayers paying less in Scotland than they would elsewhere in the UK. The draft 2018-19 Scottish budget aims for 99% of income tax payers in Scotland to pay the same or less than last year. Polling found that the public supported the SNP’s progressive tax changes for this year by 2:1—not something that we often hear stated in the Chamber. Conversely, it is not acceptable that the UK’s 2018 Budget gave the better off tax cuts at a time when those on low incomes is not acceptable that the UK’s 2018 Budget gave the better off tax cuts at a time when those on low incomes...

According to the JRF, the benefits freeze will make a couple with two children £832 a year worse off by 2020. In those circumstances, can we continue to cut public spending to balance the budget?

UK private sector debt is staggeringly high, which will be a major risk in the next recession. It is now 5% of GDP. That is the largest percentage in the G7. The debt is 60% funded by capital real estate and the buying of leveraged loans. It is entirely reliant on external input. With tariffs and barriers, it is not sustainable. The Finance Committee heard last week that we face a painful adjustment post Brexit. The Bank of England has noted that personal unsecured debt now accounts for 40% of risk in its stress tests. As a nation, we are spending more than we earn. I know that is the point the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire made, and we would all like to see a balanced budget, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East said, but we cannot continue to do that on the backs of the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society.

That is precisely what the Tories have done. They talk about the poor all the time, but it is the strong that they stick up for, and they do it time after time.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham can...
Peter Dowd: Of course I will do better. At the end of the day, it is about priorities. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) said, the Tories have spent the money in the wrong way. The hon. Member for Southport effectively accepts that. We have had £15 billion wasted on the introduction of universal credit by the Tory party, so let us get a little bit real.

I am sick to death of talking about how useless the Tory party is, so I will speak about Labour’s fiscal credibility, which I am sure will get a certain amount of unanymity in the Chamber, and the issue of balancing. I am happy to deal with it. We could have discussed the issue in a mature and grown-up way with adults in the room. Yanis Varoufakis wrote a book called “Adults in the Room”, but there are not many in the Chamber today. I suggest Members have a read of that book; it will show them what happened to Greece.

Following discussions with our advisers, including Professor Joseph Stiglitz, on 11 March 2016, the shadow Chancellor announced a fiscal credibility rule, which has five key elements. I am happy to set that out in the symposium that hon. Members are here to attend. First, Labour committed to closing the deficit on day-to-day spending within five years. Secondly, we committed to exclude investment from the deficit, so that we can borrow to invest, which is important. Thirdly, we undertook that Government debt as a proportion of trend GDP would be lower at the end of a five-year parliamentary term than at the start.

Fourthly, we committed to giving the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England the power to suspend the rule if it determines that interest rates are not having their usual effect due to the lower bound. That would allow stimulus action to step in when monetary policy is ineffective. Fifthly, we would shift the reporting requirements of the Office for Budget Responsibility so that it reports to Parliament, rather than the Treasury, and ensures ongoing Government compliance, to which the hon. Member for Dundee East referred. All the facts are there, so let Parliament have them. The elements of the rule mean that a Labour Government would not need to borrow to fund our day-to-day expenditure.

Alex Chalk: The United Kingdom last lived within its means in 2001. Under a Labour Government, when would it next do so?

Peter Dowd: If the hon. Gentleman listens to what I have to say, he will find out in due course. [Laughter.] The hon. Gentlemen laugh and snigger. Meanwhile, millions of people suffer under their policies. They should stop their sniggering and listen. I know that the Tories think they have some divine right to rule and some divine economic ability, but they have not. They need to show a little humility occasionally and listen to other people.

Unlike the Conservatives’ different, haphazard and unsuccessful attempts to achieve fiscal credibility, our fiscal credibility rule has three criteria for good economic policy. I know that economic good in economic policy is an alien concept to the Tories, but they might learn one or two things if they listen to what I have to say. The three criteria are: responsibility in economic management; recognition of the value of long-term public investment; and flexibility for changing economic circumstances. A Government trying to bind themselves into a model that has palpably failed all over the world are not particularly helpful. There has to be some flexibility.

Stewart Hosie: Is the irony not that that model would look like Greece? It is running a current account surplus, but the pain of a decade of even more brutal austerity than was faced here will be felt for generations to come. That would be success according to the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley).

Peter Dowd: The hon. Gentleman is spot on. I do not want to misquote the Secretary of State for Transport, but when East Coast went bottoms up he said that that just proved that the market works. That is the sort of economic approach that the Tories take to our country.

Let me go through the three criteria one by one. We are a party that, first, takes seriously the mantle of being guardians of a sustainable economy. We fully costed our election promises in our grey book, “Funding Britain’s Future”. The Conservative party, by contrast, gave no costings whatever in its manifesto. As the shadow Chancellor said, the only numbers in the Conservative party manifesto were the page numbers.

Meanwhile, Carl Emmerson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said in his election briefing that Labour’s “forward-looking target for current budget has much to commend it”. The IFS also estimated that we would have met our deficit target with £21 billion to spare, and that we would meet our debt target.

Secondly, we recognise that Government spending is not something to be scared of, or to have a phobia about, and that some economic metrics do not fully capture the benefits of the gradual build-up of public assets, as the hon. Member for Dundee East mentioned. That is why we distinguish between day-to-day spend and investment in our fiscal credibility rule, because investment is a different kind of Government activity that contributes to a stock of public assets, providing benefits over time. A country is not a house, or an individual who has a lifetime; it goes on, as we know, for a long time. Comparing us to a household might be a soundbite, but it is economic fantasy.

Lee Rowley: Given the hon. Gentleman’s point about us binding our hands, can he explain why, in 2006, I think, his sister party in Chile not only determined that it was going to adopt the kind of policies that he just described, but codified them into law?

Peter Dowd: I am not here to explain what sister parties anywhere do. I could quote sister parties for the Tories all over the place. The hon. Gentleman should be careful what he is wishing for when he starts to make those sorts of comparisons.

The Conservatives have been unable to appreciate this point in their words and in their actions: the Government’s fiscal target of cutting borrowing to less than 2% of GDP by 2021 does not exclude investment, or distinguish between spending and investment. In so doing, the Government overlook, and undervalue, the special character of investment. They do that time after time.

Their austerity programme, the mythical end date of which was in 2018—previously, it was before that—was more a signal of the Government’s failure than of any actual shift in approach. It has done lasting damage to our economy and society, and has left us with rough
sleeping up by 169% since 2010, stagnant wage growth—the worst since Napoleonic times—and few examples of public infrastructure being patiently built up and supported.

The third aspect is flexibility when thinking about sound economic policy. The Tories’ austerity programme arises from, as the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire has reaffirmed today, a rigid ideological belief—not always reflected in practice, I have to say—that a smaller state is always better, notwithstanding good evidence of the state’s entrepreneurial capacity and the human cost of austerity. Such rigidity in approach is something that we have avoided in our fiscal credibility rule.

The zero bound knockout that we proposed, which would allow the Bank of England to change course in times of impending crisis when interest rates can do only so much, shows our willingness to adjust economic policy frameworks in the light of circumstances. Any sensible Government would do that—not bind themselves into a failed ideology and process. That knockout is informed by lessons learned after the global financial crisis—lessons that the Conservative party seems incapable of learning—when it became clear that continual cutting of interest rates was having little impact on spending habits and aggregate demand.

More was needed from fiscal policy, and that zero bound knockout—the fourth element of the fiscal credibility rule—acknowledges that that will sometimes be the case. Professor Simon Wren-Lewis writes that if that part of the rule

“had been in operation in 2010, we would have seen further stimulus in this and perhaps subsequent years, leading to a much quicker recovery from the GFC.”

Wren-Lewis describes that part of the rule—the part that allows a reversion to expansionary fiscal policy in times of crisis—as the part that makes the rule

“unique, and brings it up to date with current macroeconomic thinking.”

**Stewart Hosie:** Is it not part of the problem, although we are moving slightly away from a balanced budget, that there has not been a comparable fiscal response to the substantial monetary response that we have seen over the last decade?

**Peter Dowd:** That is a perfectly reasonable comment. Time and again the Conservative Governments whom we have had to endure—I choose to use the word “endure”—over the last nine years have failed to take a wider view on policy-making in the country. Petty in-fighting over Brexit has put us on a precipitous, catastrophic no-deal path. They failed, through austerity, to see, and to care about, how an ideological commitment to cutting apart Government would have ripple effects across the country on rough sleeping, indebtedness, demand and productivity, which is virtually the worst in Europe under this Government.

Our fiscal credibility rule, and economic policy in general, takes a wider view, which is important. We understand how fiscal and monetary policy have to interrelate for the economy to function well in different times, and we understand how principles of economic management such as our fiscal credibility rule have to fit into a broader vision of an economy that serves society, and not just those with the strongest voices.

**Alex Chalk:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way before he sits down?

**Peter Dowd:** I have finished—I am sorry.

**Alex Chalk:** He did not answer my question.

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** Order. Have you finished, Mr Dowd?

**Peter Dowd:** Yes, I have.

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** Okay. I call the Minister.

4.17 pm

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick):** Thank you, Mr McCabe—it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. When I saw that so few colleagues from both sides of the House had attended this debate, I thought that my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) had rather made his point without having had to get to his feet. Of course, he continued with his speech for an hour, in three parts—a structure that all the best screenwriters tell people to use. He made some important points, and I do not demur from many, if any, of them.

Like my hon. Friend, I came to this House with the conviction that this country must live within its means, that it is the responsibility of our generation to be more fiscally responsible than those who came before us, that it is a moral imperative to do so, and that we must not leave the country in a weaker state, saddled with debt for the next generation to cope with. That is the task that the Chancellor, like his predecessor before him, and all of us at the Treasury have to take forward.

As my hon. Friend eloquently said, that task will also preserve what we care about in this country’s democracy. This is not unique to the United Kingdom; it is a feature of almost all liberal democracies that, unchecked, the constant desire of politicians to promise more and more and to borrow more and more may turn out to be one of those democracies’ gravest weaknesses. We want to leave the next generation a strong country, not one that is saddled with debt. The latter course would leave our economy, as my hon. Friend said clearly, at an unacceptable level of risk were there another macroeconomic shock, which inevitably there will be. The Office for Budget Responsibility sensibly predicts that there is a 50% chance of one within the next five years.

As my hon. Friend also said, that latter course would leave us in an unacceptable position in terms of our competitiveness, our ability to invest in public services and in the economic infrastructure that will drive the economy forward, and our ability to reduce taxes—all of which we want to do.

**Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab):** Will the Minister confirm that he agrees that there was a macroeconomic shock in 2008?

**Robert Jenrick:** Of course there was a macroeconomic shock in 2008, but what I think the hon. Gentleman is asking is whether the then Government had prepared for that shock. Of course they had not; all the estimates and analysis suggested that public spending significantly overran growth in the years leading up to the macroeconomic shock. That is exactly what this Government have set out to avoid.
Ian C. Lucas: Will the Minister give way again?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman was not here for the debate—he has come at the last minute—but I am happy to give way.

Ian C. Lucas: Did not the then shadow Chancellor, George Osborne—who is in Davos today, finding out how poor people live—actually tell us at the time that we were not investing or spending enough in the economy?

Robert Jenrick: I will not comment on the previous Chancellor, but he came into office to restore our public finances.

Ian C. Lucas: And he didn’t do that either.

Robert Jenrick: As we have already heard today, a great deal of progress has been made in that respect. Of course there is more to do, but we have to recognise the considerable progress that we have made. In 2010, as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire said, we inherited a very severe situation: debt had nearly doubled in two years and was snowballing, while the deficit soared to a near record level—the highest in 50 years. Of course the financial crisis had contributed to that, but so had poor management of the public finances in the years leading up to it. We have made progress, and we are nearing a turning point in the public finances. Debt has begun its first sustained fall in a generation and the deficit has been reduced by four fifths—from 9.9% of GDP to 2% at the end of 2017-18. That is an important step forward, but there is a great deal more to do.

Stewart Hosie: Does the Minister not accept that his party has any responsibility for slowing down the recovery? Does he not recognise that in 2010 the UK was one of only two countries—the other was Argentina—to completely end the fiscal stimulus, weakening the recovery and ensuring that the downturn lasted far longer than it ought to have?

Robert Jenrick: No, I do not accept that for one minute. It is exactly as a result of this Government’s fiscal responsibility in that period that the public finances have now improved, credibility has been restored in the market and business has continued to invest. For those reasons and others, we now have continued record levels of employment, record low levels of unemployment and an economy that remains remarkably resilient. Let us not forget that public spending is £200 billion higher today than it was in the last year of the last Labour Government.

We are not complacent about the debt or the deficit. The fiscal outlook may be brighter, but the need for fiscal discipline continues, as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire made very clear. The debt is still more than 80% of GDP, which is equivalent to approximately £65,000 per household, and we want to reduce that figure, for a number of reasons. We are concerned to ensure that if there is a future economic shock, the economy is resilient, and we want to improve fiscal sustainability. In the most recent Budget, the Chancellor set aside £15 billion of headroom for economic shock, out of concern for any further uncertainty that might arise as a result of Brexit.

There is a broader point, however: servicing debt is costly. If our spending on debt interest were a Ministry, it would be the third largest, after health and education. Our spending merely on servicing our debt is equivalent to what we spend on the police and the armed forces. As my hon. Friend made clear, that has an opportunity cost, because that spending has no economic or social value and reduces our ability to spend on our priorities and keep personal and corporate taxes as competitive as possible. The debt burden of interest is merely being passed to future generations.

The foundations of the Government’s approach are our fiscal rules: first, to reduce the cyclically adjusted deficit to below 2% by 2020-21, and secondly to have debt fall as a percentage of GDP in the same year. Sticking to those rules will guide the UK towards a balanced budget by the middle of the next decade. The OBR’s economic and fiscal outlook, which was published in October and was quoted from earlier, shows that the Government are forecast to have met both our near-term fiscal targets in 2017-18, three years earlier than predicted. Sensibly, given uncertainties in the fiscal outlook, the Chancellor took the view that we should retain the £15 billion of headroom against the fiscal mandate in the target year and £73 billion against the target of getting debt to fall. The forecast also shows that borrowing will fall to 0.8% of GDP by 2023-24, its lowest level since 2001.

Peter Dowd: If the Chancellor and his predecessor have been so wonderful at economic management, why have they missed every single target that they have set over the past eight years?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman rather makes the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) made. He cannot have it both ways. Either the hon. Gentleman supports debt falling—in which case he should support continued fiscal responsibility, which is one of the Government’s guiding missions—or he wishes to spend more and more. His speech argued that we should spend even more, getting us into further debt and making the situation more difficult for future generations.

Peter Dowd rose—

Robert Jenrick: I will give way one last time, but then I must make progress.

Peter Dowd: First, I did not make the latter point. The Tories can make up their own policies on the hoof—but don’t make up ours. Secondly, the Minister still has not answered the question. It has nothing to do with the outcome; it is about why the Government, if they are so economically capable and confident, have missed all their targets.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): He has already answered you.

Peter Dowd: No, he hasn’t.

Robert Jenrick: I have tried to answer. We are meeting our fiscal rules, as the OBR states—in fact, we are meeting them three years early. That has given us room in the Budget to invest at record levels, with £20.5 billion a year for the NHS, for example—its largest injection—and...
reserve headroom in the event of fiscal shock. However, the hon. Gentleman is arguing for £500 billion of additional public spending. As my hon. Friend for Cheltenham said, that makes no sense whatever.

In the little time I have left, let me answer the question asked by my hon. Friend for North East Derbyshire about how we can create better architecture to ensure that we and future Governments can be more fiscally responsible. We have done so in a number of ways. Our greatest step was the creation of the OBR, an institution that is now maturing and respected and will be retained on a cross-party basis in the future. It has enabled commentators and Members to have greater confidence in the figures—of course, there may be more that could be done in that respect. This year, we will institute the first zero-based spending review, which will look at all Government spending. We have taken account of the parallel with Chile, which has adopted that model in that past.

On longer-term spending, we have created the National Infrastructure Commission, which was designed to ensure that the Government think about the long-term challenges and invest appropriately within a defined spending envelope, guiding investments in our infrastructure according to a clear economic strategy. We have also taken action to ensure that our public accounts are among the world’s most transparent—they have been certified as such by the International Monetary Fund, for example. Most recently, the Chancellor announced the retirement of the private finance initiative, so that we continue to ensure that when our accounts are scrutinised, they are as clear and transparent as possible and we are always seeking to derive the greatest value for money for the taxpayer.

We have also sought to distinguish clearly between day-to-day consumption—important though such investment is for the future of the economy, whether it is in the police, in education or in the health service—and the long-term economic infrastructure investments that will really drive the economy forward. Over this Parliament, we will make the greatest investment in such economic infrastructure—our roads, our railways, our digital infrastructure—by any Government since the 1970s.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire for his remarks. This is an extremely important and timely debate. He made his case in his usual eloquent way, as one of the great champions in this House of smaller Government, lower taxes and fiscal responsibility. If only there were more colleagues who followed his example.

4.29 pm

Lee Rowley: I thank everyone who came to the debate—word clearly got out and everyone came in towards the end to hear its quality. I thank my hon. Friend for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd), and my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore) for their contributions.

I will end with a few points. First, I say to the hon. Member for Bootle, whose constituency I have the greatest affection for, having spent most of the decade before I joined this place working there, that it is possible to conflate austerity with this discussion, but the point was to go one step further and say that, whatever the political decisions we choose to make—we can have a debate about that—we should pay for them at the same time. Some of the people I have respected the most in fiscal and financial terms over the past 30 years have been social democrat and Labour Chancellors, including Roger Douglas in New Zealand and Michelle Bachelet in Chile, which, as I have said, codified a rule.

Secondly, in my view there is nothing ideological to living within one’s own means, over an appropriate cycle and with appropriate stabilisers and appropriate flexibility. The hon. Member for Dundee East is absolutely right to say that there is no absolute answer, but I know what the answer is not. It is not continually increasing debts, running a deficit continually or semi-continually in the long run, with the costs of servicing that debt approaching and about to exceed £50 billion. If that is the passion of youth, I apologise, but perhaps when we meet again to talk about this issue—and I hope we do—and we figure it out, the hon. Gentleman might nominate us all for the Nobel peace prize.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the balanced budget rule.
Furniture Manufacturers

4.32 pm

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I should explain that we are running 30 minutes or so behind schedule because of votes in the main Chamber earlier. We now move to the debate on furniture manufacturers. I call Maggie Throup to move the motion on the next debate, which will end at two minutes past 5.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of furniture manufacturers to the UK economy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, and it is also really good to see so many people with an interest in the furniture industry. I move the motion as the chair of the all-party parliamentary furniture industry group, which exists to raise awareness of the UK’s thriving furniture industry and to promote its importance to our economy.

I declare an interest as the Member of Parliament who proudly represents the town of Long Eaton, which is globally recognised as the UK centre of quality upholstery manufacturing. The furniture industry continues to flourish in Erewash, with more than 50 companies, such as Steed Upholstery, Artistic Upholstery, David Gundry and Gascoigne Designs, involved in furniture manufacturing and its supply chain in Long Eaton alone. It employs about 2,700 people with a turnover of more than £250 million each year. On a national basis, Government-verified figures show that the wider furniture and furnishings sector, including specialised retail but alone. It employs about 2,700 people with a turnover of more than £250 million each year. On a national basis, Government-verified figures show that the wider furniture and furnishings sector, including specialised retail but excluding general retail, supports some 327,000 jobs across 50,000 registered companies.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this very important debate. Does she agree that in addition to the larger companies there are some smaller companies, such as Rowlands Upholstery in Great Grimsby, that do a fantastic job—not only employing people, but providing high-quality furniture? They are essential to people’s lives, and to our local economies.

Maggie Throup: I completely agree, because the majority of upholsterers in my constituency are exactly the same type of company—small and medium-sized enterprises that employ people locally, generation after generation.

Consumer expenditure on furniture and furnishings was almost £17.5 billion in 2017 and exceeded all other spend in the household goods sector. That represents a 21% increase from 2014. Year-on-year growth in the sector between 2014 and 2016 rose from 4.8% to 6.9%, with growth between 2016 and 2017 higher still, at 7.9%. The latest data shows that furniture and furnishings sales continued to rise into early 2018, with first and second quarter consumer expenditure 8.5% and 8.3% higher, respectively, than for the equivalent periods in 2017, despite many other retail sectors experiencing an increasingly challenging market.

In addition, trade fairs such as the biannual Long Point exhibition, held in Long Eaton, continue to attract global attention from international buyers looking to stock some of the finest sofas and easy chairs the UK has to offer. That has led to a steady increase in furniture exports since 2012, peaking at £1.19 billion in 2017 and representing a 12.4% increase on 2016 figures.

The good news does not stop there. Provisional estimates for 2018 indicate that exports for last year could be higher still, at £1.27 billion, which would represent a year-on-year increase of 7%. Taken together, these figures clearly demonstrate that the appreciation of and the demand for hand-made British craftsmanship remains high, both nationally and internationally.

It is hard to speak in this place without mentioning Brexit, but I promise the House that I will keep my remarks brief and confined to two main areas—trade and export, and standards and regulations. Like all sectors, the UK furniture industry now just wants clarity and a degree of certainty over Brexit at the earliest opportunity, in order to preserve confidence in the UK as a stable business environment in which to invest, and to assist with business planning.

With specific regard to trade and export, the industry wants to ensure that the Government give serious consideration to the cost of importing materials, both finished and components, during the renegotiation of our relationship with the EU. For example, if the import of fine Italian fabric were to be interrupted, manufacturers in my constituency have voiced concerns that production may be significantly disrupted or even halted while they sourced material from elsewhere. Consequently, that would have a huge knock-on effect on the local workforce and would risk the financial viability of many of these small, often family-run businesses.

Britain is soon to regain its ability to negotiate independent free trade agreements, which I believe presents a fantastic opportunity for all UK businesses to access new markets outside of the UK and Europe—something that the furniture industry already has significant experience in doing. Given that there are 30% more furniture manufacturers that do not currently export but are planning to do so within the next year, I welcome the Government’s new five-year UK export support strategy, which provides manufacturers with further details of the package of support available to help exporters post Brexit. We also have a responsibility, as Members of Parliament with furniture manufacturers in our constituencies and as members of the APPG, to continue to bang the drum for the industry and ensure that they do not lose out to larger sectors during future trade negotiations.

I turn to standards and regulation. The UK already maintains some of the highest standards for furniture safety in the world, but here again clarity is needed on both product safety and the mutual recognition regime that the industry will have to work within post Brexit.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing about this debate. Before she moves beyond Brexit, does she agree with me that some of the pressures that some of our small and medium-sized furniture businesses face come from the lack of support and assistance that they are getting from the Department for International Trade with exports and exchange rate facilitation, or even things like intellectual property rights?

Maggie Throup: As I outlined earlier, the Government have produced an export strategy, which I would encourage all SMEs to look at and take part in. That is one of my messages today.
I shall move on from Brexit. As shown across my constituency, furniture manufacturers require a highly skilled workforce to retain their international reputation for quality. The skills of an upholsterer are passed down from generation to generation—often in the form of an apprenticeship, then finely tuned over a number of years, which can span well past the usual age of retirement. The industry therefore needs support from Government to help it to bring new generations of craftsmen and women through the system with the right skills to ensure that this type of art survives throughout the 21st century.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this very important debate. She is just about to highlight excellent British craftsmanship. Just as in her constituency, in Slough there is an array of manufacturers, designers and fitters of furniture for bedrooms, kitchens and so forth. We pay tribute to those individuals for their craftsmanship. Does she agree that their high-quality, skilled jobs are an asset to the local and national economy?

Maggie Throup: I completely agree. I would like to invite the hon. Gentleman to be a member of the all-party parliamentary group.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that when we talk of furniture manufacturers, we are referring not just to large factories in city centres? Many small rural towns and villages have small enterprises making furniture.

Maggie Throup: I completely agree. This is something that I think we underestimate: furniture manufacturing is happening across the country and has a great input into our economy.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maggie Throup: Sorry, I am going to move on.

I know that the Minister has taken steps to address the issue of skills, which includes helping to ensure that young people understand the benefit of an apprenticeship as compared with remaining in formal education post 16. However, I ask him to review the viability of the apprenticeship levy, which businesses in my constituency have raised concerns about, and to work with the sector to raise awareness on how apprenticeship funding is relevant to SMEs.

I briefly want to mention the environmental role of the furniture industry and the important part it can play in our economy to reduce waste. It is said that the upholstery industry never dies; it always recovers. As we move from a throwaway society back to one that recycles and, thanks to Kirstie Allsopp, upcycles, that sentiment has perhaps never been truer. Once again, people are looking for something that is either bespoke or a quality piece of furniture that stands out from the crowd and lasts forever, or they want to restore a much-loved piece of furniture. The Government should capitalise on this shifting trend and work with the industry to encourage even more people to reuse and recycle a quality British piece of furniture rather than opt for a disposable flat-pack alternative.

It would be remiss of me to make a speech substantively about Long Eaton and not mention HS2. As the House might know, Long Eaton is the town most affected already by HS2, which in turn puts at risk a number of the historical upholstery firms to which I have previously referred and the homes of many of their employees, who will have to be relocated to make way for the rail line. The working draft environmental statements on phase 2b of the line identify that 1,004 jobs could be displaced or lost along the Ratcliffe-on-Soar to Long Eaton section of the route.

I made it clear in my response to the recent public consultation that it is unacceptable for any jobs to be lost because of HS2, but that need not be the case should the process for relocating displaced businesses be managed professionally. Given the unique nature of the upholstery industry in Long Eaton, displaced manufacturers must be relocated in the NG10 postcode area. The highly skilled workforce, many of whom live alongside the current factories in a true working town, must be able to access any new premises with ease. It is incumbent on both HS2 Ltd and the Government to use their discretionary powers of compulsory purchase ahead of Royal Assent to allow manufacturers to account for that in their forward business planning, and to allow for a smooth transition from their current location to a new one.

My personal ask of the Minister is to look seriously at the idea of establishing a cross-departmental taskforce with the Department for Transport to provide businesses being forced to relocate through no fault of their own with the necessary advice and support—including financial support—because this area is severely lacking. I have a meeting with the Minister already pencilled in for the first week of February, and I look forward to having a productive discussion with him, to make further progress on that idea.

I turn to Parliament itself. We will shortly commence a multi-billion-pound programme of refurbishment to restore one of the world’s most historic and iconic buildings. Although the Chamber was, on the orders of Churchill, purposely designed not to seat all 650 Members of Parliament at once, the refurbishment will undoubtedly include the restoration of thousands of pieces of furniture across the estate, including our famous green Benches. I cannot think of a better way for people in the UK furniture industry, including upholsterers from Erewash, to showcase their traditional skills than by contributing to the restoration of this mother of all Parliaments.

Like the art of upholstery, where much of the detailed work goes unseen—covered neatly by a colourful fabric—the UK furniture industry, particularly manufacturing, is so much more than it has perhaps been traditionally given credit for. Yes, it faces its own challenges, some of which I am sure the Minister will address in his remarks. Despite that, the industry remains resilient in the changing and challenging world of retail, and it continues to fly the flag for British manufacturing both at home and abroad.

I am delighted that the House has had the opportunity to consider the contribution to our economy made by UK furniture manufacturers and the wider sector. I thank the British Furniture Confederation for its continued support for the all-party parliamentary group and its tireless efforts to promote the industry. I commend this motion to the House.
The Long Eaton lace industry has gone, as have many of my childhood and that of my parents and grandparents. There was the clothing industry in the Leeds they say—disrepair in the eyes of commentators for a manufacturers—maybe she should be the greatly loved representing the interests of upholstery and furniture predecessor, Jessica Lee, did exactly the same job, Long Eaton, and I pay tribute to her for doing so. Her there are some who have been here longer than others would not like to pick out any particular Members, but me. She mentioned much-loved pieces of furniture. I 4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, and today is no exception. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) for securing this debate, and to all hon. Members who have attended just to hear her—or maybe just to hear me. She mentioned much-liked pieces of furniture. I would not like to pick out any particular Members, but there are some who have been here longer than others and who could be referred to as such. I know she is very interested in representing her constituents who work in Long Eaton, and I pay tribute to her for doing so. Her predecessor, Jessica Lee, did exactly the same job, representing the interests of upholstery and furniture manufacturers—maybe she should be the greatly loved piece of furniture to which the hon. Lady referred.

The British manufacturing industry fell into—shall we say—disrepair in the eyes of commentators for a long time. There was the clothing industry in the Leeds of my childhood and that of my parents and grandparents. The Long Eaton lace industry has gone, as have many other industries in our constituencies.

Maggie Throup: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I think my hon. Friend wants to talk about the lace industry—I know it is still there, although I believe that it was in the next town rather than in Long Eaton, if my memory is correct.

Maggie Throup: I am delighted that the Minister recognises the importance of the Nottingham lace industry, which was actually mainly in Derbyshire. My constituency has the final remaining Nottingham lace manufacturer in Ilkeston, which is the other town.

Richard Harrington: I actually corrected myself—it is Ilkeston. I know there are two towns in my hon. Friend’s constituency, but for the purpose of the debate, Long Eaton is a centre of upholstery and furniture, which she will know as chair of the APPG for the furniture industry. We all support business in our constituency. I am pleased that the industry we are talking about is doing so well—so much so that people will come to Long Eaton from all over the world for the big annual exhibition that she mentioned. That is wonderful.

Industries are often forgotten about. In my role as Minister for businesses and industry, I spend a lot of time on the automotive industry, the aerospace industry and other huge employers throughout the country, but it is so pleasing when the House debates examples of how well more localised industries are doing. The economic importance of the furniture manufacturing sector is clear: it numbers 15,000 businesses and nearly 100,000 people. The east midlands region alone accounts for about 14% of that total across the country.

Furniture is fundamental to all our lives. The massed ranks of the House of Commons are sitting on nicely upholstered furniture in this Chamber. How many of them would be here if we had only planks to sit on? I am not sure. Obviously, Mr McCabe, you would always have a nice leather-upholstered chair.

Hon. Members: We would still be here!

Richard Harrington: The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) looks very comfortable in her chair, and I am not sure that she would be attracted to something less comfortable. Maybe she sacrifices herself and uses more uncomfortable chairs in Great Grimsby, in which case I would advise her constituents to buy comfortable things made in Long Eaton.

My hon. Friend mentioned three things. First, the current uncertainty around EU exit; secondly, the regulatory framework in which the sector operates; and thirdly, the need to maintain a skilled workforce. I will try to deal with those separately.

On the EU exit, I know that the uncertainty of not knowing the rules of the future is very difficult for business. I have been in business for most of my life and I know that the one thing you need is certainty to plan—not you, Mr McCabe, but one generally. I am sure you would if you were in business, as you may be in the future if you decide to change career; I am sure it would be a brilliant career, whatever you decided to do. One thinks about the certainty of rules and the importance of frictionless trade in goods for supply chains across industry.

That is particularly important for the furniture industry, which relies, as my hon. Friend said, on sourcing the very best materials, from wherever they may come. That could be the EU, with the Italian fabrics that she mentioned, or hardwoods from other parts of the world. The Government will do everything we can to ensure that the movement of goods remains as frictionless as possible to the benefit of industry across the UK.

Secondly, on regulation, the Government understand the importance of clarity on product safety and mutual recognition issues.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): To return to Brexit momentarily, I visited the Silverlining furniture company in Wrexham—a very high-quality business that exports high-spec furniture abroad—and one point it made was that skilled labour from all across Europe works for it at a very high level. We have to focus not only on materials, but on people.

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman makes a brilliant point, which concerns not only the people who come to work in factories such as the one in his constituency, but the free flow and ability of labour to install and maintain many UK-manufactured products in the European Union. Many of the companies that we regard as manufacturing businesses make a lot of their added value from precisely those sorts of services. Although, like most people, I accept that when we leave the European Union we will not exactly have free movement of labour—that is part of being in the European Union—there has to be a system that enables businesses to fill vacancies quickly, without thousands of pounds-worth of bureaucracy and too many rules. I pay tribute to the people from the European Union who contribute so much to the manufacturing industry in this country. Long may that continue.

I just got going on free movement, but I shall return to regulation, which it is also important to get right. We need to maintain the industry’s reputation for excellence in both quality and safety, and to make sure that we have the support of businesses, because they work to the regulations. By and large, they want regulations that are the same here as in the countries to which they sell.
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): My hon. Friend rightly speaks about our furniture manufacturers’ reputation for high standards, which is one of the many reasons why Boss Design in my constituency has been picked to furnish the new World Trade Centre in New York. Research by the British Furniture Confederation showed that some products that come into the UK with CE approval are not properly flame resistant and can be burnt to a cinder in as little as 10 minutes, whereas a properly compliant product would self-extinguish within 10 to 15 seconds. Is he as concerned about that as I am?

Richard Harrington: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that to my attention; it is a relevant point. I remind hon. Members who may have temporarily forgotten that the Prime Minister visited Boss Design and was very impressed with what she saw. I will make sure that the relevant officials are aware of the point that my hon. Friend makes.

We share the desire of businesses for consumers to have confidence that the products in their homes are produced to rigorous safety requirements. We have to work with both business and our EU partners to ensure that regulations are effective and fit for the future. That has nothing to do with whether or not we are in the European Union. There is a commonality of interest and desire among people all over the world to have the same standards.

I recognise that the industry’s continued success relies on having the right skills. As my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash mentioned, just one sofa requires a range of skills, from carpentry to the intricate skills of the upholsterer. The Government are keen to ensure that the industry has the skills it needs. We have heard the call for an immigration system based purely on skills and qualifications, and such a system is set out in the immigration White Paper. There has to be an easy and simple route for skilled workers, because it is otherwise difficult for manufacturers and other employers as far as time and money are concerned. When we talk about friction, we mean not only the friction of raw materials coming in, but of all things to do with business, and we are very conscious of that. That is particularly important where there is a skill shortage. The Government will engage businesses and employers on setting salary thresholds and the conditions around them.

In the long term, we want to nurture home-grown talent within companies, which is where apprenticeships come in. We need to develop that. The apprenticeship levy was a good idea, but it must not become a payroll tax that means that companies are unable to spend money that was theirs to begin with. That will require a lot of work. The sector has been very willing to work with Government to make the apprenticeship levy a success. Whether through the British furniture manufacturers’ FIESTA—Furniture and Interiors Education, Skills and Training Alliance—programme, T-levels or the national apprenticeship awards, the furniture industry has outperformed in its contribution to apprenticeships relative to its size. We have to ensure that the future generation of furniture makers succeed.

Finally, my hon. Friend raised the concerns of her constituents in Long Eaton about High Speed 2, as she has done numerous times in the House. The Government’s local growth team—a joint unit between the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—is supporting the Department for Transport in working constructively with places along the HS2 route and taking into account the needs of local businesses. I hope that her constituents were able to engage with the consultations on phase 2b of the route which were undertaken between October and December last year. We are analysing the feedback from that consultation and I would be happy to discuss it with her in our meeting on 5 February, which we arranged following her recent questions to me in the House. I will ensure that the relevant officials from all Departments are there.

The country has a rich history of producing world-class furniture, and my hon. Friend’s constituency has a tradition of producing world-class MPs. I thank her for reminding us both of the furniture industry’s great contribution to our country and of the strong position it is in to make a positive contribution to a more sustainable future.

Question put and agreed to.
Town of Culture Award

4.59 pm

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): This debate is obviously not very popular! It is scheduled to run until four minutes past 6 and about 15 people have put in to speak, so I guess that is about two minutes each. I will leave you to sort that out. I call David Hanson to move the motion.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the establishment of a town of culture award.

I appreciate the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I am grateful to my hon. Friends for their turnout, which shows the Minister the strength of feeling and the focus on towns that we all share. I am pleased to see Government Members here, too. The debate has one clear aim: to explore with the Minister the possibility of establishing a specific town of culture award on similar terms to the city of culture award, so the smaller towns we all represent can participate on equal terms and enjoy the benefits of such an award.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Is it not the case that towns can apply for the city of culture award but it is very much a David and Goliath competition, because towns often do not have the resources to put in a bid of the necessary quality? For that reason and others, I support the right hon. Gentleman’s initiative.

David Hanson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his support. It is true that towns are part of the wider city of culture establishment, but I defy the Minister to name a town that has won that award. I think there is merit in enabling towns to regenerate, promote themselves and participate, because they have a great deal to give.

I hope the Minister focuses on our one demand and establishes a town of culture award, but will he also discuss the idea with the devolved Administration in Scotland and my colleagues in the devolved Administration in Wales, and meet his ministerial colleagues in Northern Ireland and, in due course—I hope—the devolved Administration there, to establish the scheme on a UK-wide basis? We could have winners in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England, and perhaps an overall town of culture for the whole United Kingdom.

This idea has gained traction over the past few weeks. Although I welcome the support of the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), the idea had its genesis in the Labour Towns group, where Sir Greg Knight, the idea had its genesis in the Labour Towns group, where, and my colleagues in the devolved Administration in Wales, and meet his ministerial colleagues in Northern Ireland and, in due course—I hope—the devolved Administration there, to establish the scheme on a UK-wide basis? We could have winners in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England, and perhaps an overall town of culture for the whole United Kingdom.

This idea has gained traction over the past few weeks. Although I welcome the support of the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), the idea had its genesis in the Labour Towns group, where Labour Members who represent towns have looked at how we can help regenerate our towns and communities through transport, housing, employment and tourism. The Minister will know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has written to the Secretary of State to ask for our central demand—the establishment of a town of culture award—to be considered. It is an idea whose time has come.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I commend my right hon. Friend for securing the debate. Does he agree that the attendance indicates the real sense of frustration among non-city Members of Parliament that there has been far too little discussion of the beneficial effect of culture on towns up and down the country? That needs to change.

David Hanson: I look forward to hearing my hon. Friends’ contributions in due course. They know that culture is an economic generator for towns. It provides individuals with an opportunity to promote themselves and their skills, it can bring towns together to celebrate their history, and it can be a catalyst for change, confidence and support for economic regeneration.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): D. H. Lawrence, the internationally famous writer, was born and raised in the town of Eastwood in my constituency. We have a fantastic birthplace museum there. It is run by the local authority, which is obviously under financial pressure. We could do so much more to celebrate and promote our most famous son. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we could do a lot more to enable our towns to reach their full potential if there were equitable distribution of lottery funding?

David Hanson: Indeed. There is a separate debate, albeit relevant to this one, about whether towns, which contribute to the lottery pot, receive a fair share of lottery funding. In effect, there is a transfer of wealth from poorer towns to cities. That enables the promotion of important cultural projects, but I think my hon. Friends would agree that we should look at how we can invest that money to promote culture in our towns.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): On that point, as of last March, my constituency had received £13 million of lottery funding since 1995, compared with £64 million for the Prime Minister’s constituency. Barnsley is a fantastic cultural town; in my constituency, we have everything from Elsecar Heritage Centre to Worsbrough mill. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate. I totally agree with him, not least because I think Barnsley would win the award.

David Hanson: Well, I think participating in the award would be as important as winning it, because it would energise community groups, local councils and businesses to aspire to meet the objectives that I am sure the Minister will share.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing the debate and for being generous with his time. We will hear all sorts of amazing examples of the culture and heritage in towns across the country. Pontefract is the home of a historic castle and a liquorice fair, and Castleford was the home of Henry Moore.

There are amazing examples right across the country that are just not celebrated because we do not have the investment we need. We also need investment in new arts and culture jobs. Given the widening gap in jobs growth between city and town constituencies, does my right hon. Friend agree that the town of culture campaign has to be part of a much wider programme of investment, and that we must ensure we get our fair share of investment and jobs in towns across the country?

David Hanson: Absolutely. My right hon. Friend knows that we are focused on transport, the economy, jobs, businesses and the regeneration of our town centres,
but culture and activities celebrating our history and what happens in towns are linked to all those things, because they bring people in to spend.

Two of my favourite cities in the United Kingdom—Hull, where I went to university, and Liverpool, where I was born—have recently been part of the city of culture programme. The city of Hull estimates that that programme generated £60 million in 2017 alone from visitor income and additional drive. It generated 800 new jobs, 5 million visitors and £220 million of additional investment in Hull. After Liverpool was city of culture, 44% of its residents expressed a positive response to the programme. It made them feel proud of where they lived—perhaps even more so than things have in the past. I am very proud of where I was born and I am very proud of where I live now, but the city of culture gave the people of Liverpool an energy that could be translated into action and used to create jobs.

Town halls and cultural centres are extremely important. I do not want to take up too much time, because I know many Members want to speak, but I cannot resist mentioning the four towns in my constituency as examples of the potential benefit of a town of culture award. Flint, where I live, has a population of 13,000 people. It was founded around a castle built in 1277. That castle is still there. It is a historical monument that people could and should visit. It was the scene of the deposition of Richard II, who was put on trial in Westminster Hall. The whole second act of Shakespeare's "Richard II" is set in Flint castle, and that play has been performed in the castle. We have had festivals, we have had choirs—male and female—and we have the Eisteddfod in 1969. Even Tom Cruise's great-great-grandfather came from Flint, which shows that people can aspire to achieve in the arts. There is a Turner painting of Flint castle, which—believe it or not—has never been to Flint. It is currently in a gallery in London. If Flint won the town of cultural award, that painting could be brought to Flint to be seen on a regular basis.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I have been to Flint—I had my photo taken in front of the station sign. On my right hon. Friend's point about national treasures being in galleries and museums in our cities, a cultural award for our towns might not only embolden the communities that people could and should visit, it was the scene of the deposition of Richard II, who was put on trial in Westminster Hall. The whole second act of Shakespeare's "Richard II" is set in Flint castle, and that play has been performed in the castle. We have had festivals, we have had choirs—male and female—and we have the Eisteddfod in 1969. Even Tom Cruise's great-great-grandfather came from Flint, which shows that people can aspire to achieve in the arts. There is a Turner painting of Flint castle, which—believe it or not—has never been to Flint. It is currently in a gallery in London. If Flint won the town of cultural award, that painting could be brought to Flint to be seen on a regular basis.

David Hanson: As I said, a number of things are happening in Flint. They could all be celebrated by the people and that painting could return as part of being a town of culture.

Without revisiting my maiden speech, I should say that another important place in my constituency, when it comes to this debate, is Mold—a town of 10,000 people. The Mold gold cape is an ancient gold object currently in the British Museum: it is not being displayed in Mold. Let me turn to culture. Mold has Theatr Clwyd, the only production company in the United Kingdom owned by a local authority. It produces plays, some of which will shortly be in the west end. We have a food festival and a Novemberfest beer festival, as well as art installations through the town. This summer marks the 150th anniversary of the Mold riots, in which four miners and one bystander were shot dead. We will be having a community play in the town this summer to commemorate that, which will involve people and make them feel part of the history of the town.

We have a blues and soul festival, the eisteddfod, and the Daniel Owen festival, which is a major Welsh language poetry festival, in the town. We have the football. Rhys Ifans, who people will know from "Notting Hill", came from Mold, as did Jonny Buckland, one of the guitarists in Coldplay. Siân Gibson, who is in "Peter Kay's Car Share", is currently resident in Mold. There is a cultural appetite and there are cultural aspirations for people to do things in the future.

In Holywell, in my constituency—where the actor Jonathan Pryce was born—there is the Well Inn music festival, as well as a country music and line-dancing festival and the Cadi Ha Welsh dancing festival. There are also heritage walks and the Greenfield Valley Heritage Park, which has historic buildings on display.

The smallest town in my constituency is Caerwys, with just over 1,500 people, but the eisteddfod held there in 1523 and 1568 led to the first ever legislation to control minstrels and bands, which was passed by Elizabeth I's Parliament in 1588.

There is a cultural history that people need to understand and celebrate, but it also has an economic impact. Theatr Clwyd, as a major production theatre, employs hundreds of people and produces quality plays. Flintshire County Council invests something like £750,000 into the theatre. For every pound it invests in that theatre, we get an external economic impact within Flintshire of £8 and across north-east Wales, including Wrexham, of over £10. That is because people come to the theatre, but they also go to the shop and the petrol station, stay in a hotel and eat in a restaurant. They support the local economy in that theatre by buying goods for sale in the local theatre, and by spending their wages in the theatre. It has an economic impact.

Flint, Mold, Holywell and Caerwys are all supported by their local councils, which are active and engaged, and invest ratepayers' resource in supporting activities. Mold, Flint and Holywell happen to be Labour-controlled councils that are investing, supporting and sponsoring activity that is having an economic impact. I hope the Minister will recognise that and look at how we can celebrate and promote it, and be engaged by it. With due respect to those three towns, great as they are, Flint, Mold and Holywell cannot compete with the cities of Hull or Liverpool, in terms of their scale or ambition. What they can do is have great activity in their own world, which the town can celebrate and look to promote in the future.

The central ask today, from all of my right hon. and hon. Friends, is for us to relish the chance for those four towns, and every town that those of us here represent, to be able to say, "We aspire to do better, to increase our economy, to engage with our community and to put culture at the heart of our towns." All our towns have had that in the past—through miners welfare clubs, social clubs and a whole range of activity. We have to give that back to the community and support that for the future.

There is a city of culture, which is a great thing that we relish, welcome and appreciate, but the challenge for the Minister is that there is scope for a town of culture within that. The Minister has the chance to encourage
investment, to reignite county pride, to celebrate history and culture, to encourage diversity, to promote ambition and to nurture talent. I hope that he takes that chance today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Order. I want to start the wind-up speeches at 5.44 pm.

5.14 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (David Hanson) on securing this important debate, about which I am very keen—so keen, in fact, that my recent column in the Slough Express was entirely devoted to a town of culture award.

Slough is on the up: we have moved on from John Betjeman’s poem. We want no friendly bombs, there is grass for cows to graze, we do not just eat tinned food and it is certainly fit for humans now. We are keen to show that we have a lot more than just David Brent and “The Office” to offer. Slough is a fantastic, diverse cultural melting pot and now it has become a major business, creative and cultural powerhouse, with Pinewood Studios right on our doorstep. A lot of people from Slough are working there, contributing to our collective national culture and increasing our collective national pride in our country.

We have the iconic old Adelphi cinema in Slough, where the Beatles performed on more than one occasion. The council and other organisations are doing brilliant work. We have the Slough youth awards, which exemplify the magnificent creativity of our young people. I think our town would do very well if we were competing with other towns up and down the country.

I impress on the Minister that there is so much support for this idea: we would be obliged if he confirmed that an annual town of culture prize rather than just a city of culture prize would be conferred. If it comes to sharing the money more fairly, current statistics show that Arts Council funding is more than four times higher on average in city constituencies than in town constituencies. About 70% of Arts Council national portfolio theatre grants awarded in 2015 to 2018 went to cities, with a pitiful 12% awarded to towns. The current scenario is not good enough; our towns are being left behind.

Many people from working-class backgrounds, residing in towns, are being excluded from arts and culture. Our communities can benefit. I am well aware that there are many different Members wanting to speak, so I will bring my points to a conclusion, but please, please let us have the annual town of culture award.

5.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on bringing forward the debate. We were proud to be the home nation of the first UK city crowned city of culture in 2013—lovely Londonderry. As the Member for Strangford, I well remember thinking that Newtownards, despite all that we have to offer, could never be considered for that prestigious title because it is not a city. That is why I am pleased to be here and to support the right hon. Gentleman.

The award would enable the tourism industry to point its eyes and minds towards the hidden gems throughout this beautiful United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; it would be worth every penny needed to set the initiative up.

Let me give the example of Newtownards—we are all here for our constituencies, and why not? The little town is 25 minutes from the airport on a great road with enhanced travel links in the form of local bus routes, which are fully modern. Visitors could stay in the local hotel or in one of the many B&Bs that dot the area. The B&Bs have phenomenal views of countryside and the incomparable Strangford lough; I live on the edge of it. Ulster Scots culture, history, verse, poetry and music—it is all there.

People can have an active holiday as well, with water sports, cycling and quad racing parks, sedate walks in our forest parks and country rambles. We have the world-famous Mount Stewart gardens and country home, Scrabo tower and Exploris in Portaferry, which is renowned the world over. Those who want the arts can enjoy choral performances in the old Priory, which dates back to St Patrick, and the independently-owned Lyric theatre, as well as all the other things that come with cinema and nightlife. For those who want to shop—everybody likes to shop, especially the ladies—we have a high street packed with boutique shops to suit anyone’s tastes. For the kids, we have the Ark open farm, which is exactly what we need.

You want a spa weekend? Of course you do. We have a brand new all-singing, all-dancing Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure complex, with clip and climb, crazy golf, soft play and swimming facilities for the children, Swedish saunas, steam rooms, aromatherapy rooms, heated seating, heated relaxation pools and beauty appointments, all in one place—Newtownards. We have fine dining, because once you have got rid of all that extra weight, you can go for Thai, Chinese, Indian, or Italian food, good homemade cooking and even pub grub. It is all there—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) knows it, too.

I know that other MPs can well boast of their towns, and they should, but I will say this: I do not think any of them can really compare to Newtownards. Yet the sad fact is that not enough people know that the £50 flight to Northern Ireland is well worth every penny. This award is something that could highlight Newtownards and other towns like it. I thank the right hon. Member for Delyn and give him my full support. I have my application ready for the first award.

5.21 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing this debate. In thinking about the demise of towns, we have concentrated a lot on shopping and shops, and I think we have the balance wrong. The idea of a town of culture award is really important, because people want far more in the place they live in than to be able to go shopping.

My constituents have a fantastically rich heritage. Barnard Castle, for example, was the home of Richard III and it is now the home to the greatest collection of
European paintings between London and Edinburgh, at the Bowes Museum. Shildon is the birthplace of the railway and at the moment we are limbering up for the celebration of 200 years since 1825, with a heritage action zone. Bishop Auckland itself has been the home of the Bishops of Durham for 900 years.

Perhaps this is the most interesting example of how culture can be used to regenerate: the Church Commissioners had the idea of selling Zurbarán paintings that hung in the palace, and local people completely opposed that. We ran a very successful campaign to keep those works of art in Bishop Auckland and not to let them be taken to a gallery in London or even the west coast of America. Consequently, a philanthropist, Jonathan Ruffer, came and has invested in the castle. We are now seeing an absolute flowering, including a new Spanish art gallery, in partnership with the Museo del Prado in Madrid, a mining art gallery, a summer night show, Kynren, and a museum of the history of religion supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

That is all absolutely flourishing and it is giving people a new focus and a new sense of pride. It is great for people who live there, but it is also a reason for tourists to come to the town, and that has economic spin-offs. We have created lots of apprenticeships and are hoping to create 1,000 jobs. If anybody wants to get off the train between York and Edinburgh, I suggest that a long weekend in my constituency would be fantastic.

5.23 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate, which was opened so magnificently by my right hon. Friend and near neighbour, the Member for Delyn (David Hanson); I am sure the Minister can feel our enthusiasm.

I do not want to sound biased, but of course the constituency of Clwyd South has the best range of towns and villages, the magnificent Chirk castle, the outstanding Llangollen international eisteddfod and of course Corwen, the great home of Owain Glyndŵr. All those towns have magnificent histories and culture and so much going on, but I also want to put in a word for our villages. As we speak about the importance of developing a town of culture, it is important that we recognise the culture in our villages.

I think of Glyn Ceiriog in my constituency, which so magnificently hosted the Powys eisteddfod a few years ago. I think of the community of Cefn Mawr, which has the wonderful Cefn Mawr and District Museum, entirely run by volunteers. Such is the interest in that museum that local schoolchildren produced a wonderful history set at the time of the first world war armistice. Among the other many magnificent villages in my 240 square mile constituency is my home community of Rhoslanerchrugog. My right hon. Friend spoke earlier about the miners’ institute there—the wonderful Stiwt—with several choirs and so much more. It has a great Welsh nonconformist heritage. Those are just a few of the things in my constituency that I can do justice to in a couple of minutes, but as we speak about the towns, let us speak about the villages too.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): On the subject of Rhoslanerchrugog, I know it has a fantastic working men’s hall and institute. In Blaenau Gwent we have a world-class brass band, the Trefedgar town band, and the estimable Beaufort male choir, who recently performed with Public Service Broadcasting. People may be surprised to know that in the villages above Trefil in Trefedgar we now have a growing film industry, which has contributed to Hollywood blockbusters and, of course, “Doctor Who”, which is produced in Cardiff in Wales. Does my hon. Friend agree that this initiative would be brilliant for boosting our cultural pride across our country?

Susan Elan Jones: I agree totally with my hon. Friend. I am aware of so many people still wanting to speak that I will end my speech, but I think the award is a wonderful idea.

5.26 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing this important debate.

Something happened to me last night that illustrates the importance of this debate. I was talking to a colleague of mine who represents, shall we say, a more prosperous south Manchester seat. I told him I was going to speak about Heywood and Middleton’s rich cultural heritage, and his response was, “What are you going to talk about for the other 59 minutes?” He probably had not envisaged how popular the debate would be—I actually have only two minutes, so in the other minute I have left I will talk about the rich cultural heritage of Heywood and Middleton.

Even the Wetherspoon pub in Heywood is named after the Lancashire dialect poet Edwin Waugh. Steve Coogan was born in Middleton. The Chameleons and the Courteeners are famous bands born and bred in Middleton. Julie Goodyear, also known as Bet Lynch, was born in Heywood and still lives there. We have Middleton Arena, a fantastic cultural hub that is currently rolling out a new programme of National Theatre live broadcasts, making theatre from here in London accessible to residents in my constituency. We have Heywood Civic Centre, a venue providing a programme of live events and community participation, aiming to become a borough-wide hub for community-led cultural participation and creation.

We have my friend, Labour councillor Kallum Nolan, who has made a film about Sam Bamford, the radical who led the march from Middleton to Peterloo—the film is a rival to Mike Leigh’s film, “Peterloo”—and used local people as actors. We have Cartwheel Arts, based in Heywood, and we have the architecture of Edgar Wood, who left Middleton with a fine collection of historical buildings, immortalised in a recent film, “A Painted Veil”, made by Middleton filmmaker Anthony Dolan and which I was proud to host in Parliament last year.

I wish I had more time to talk about the artistic and cultural activities that go on in my wonderful constituency. I will finish by saying that I cannot wait to enter Heywood and Middleton for the newly founded town of culture award.

5.29 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) for securing the debate.
I fully support the call for a town of culture for the UK. Culture plays a huge part in our economy—it is worth £90 billion a year. One in every 11 jobs is in the cultural industries. The percentage of our GDP spent on goods is going down; the percentage spent on experience is going up. The UK is a world leader in music, theatre, film, literature, architecture and design, but that has been too closely focused in cities. We need to expand that to towns. We need to increase the amount spent by central Government on culture, which is 0.4% of GDP, even though it produces 9% of jobs.

I was approached recently by creatives in my home town of Rhyl, who want to use creativity to encourage regeneration. They reminded me of the great people from my town who have been involved in the creative industries: Mike Peters and The Alarm; Lisa Scott-Lee from Steps; Nerys Hughes from “The Liver Birds”; Lee Evans the comedian; Adrian Henri, the beat poet, who worked in a fairground in Rhyl; Carol Vorderman, who was educated in Rhyl; Paul Higginson, my friend, who is chief executive officer of 20th Century Fox in Europe, Africa and the middle east; and Sara Sugarman, the Hollywood film director. We have had a folk club in Rhyl for 55 years, a musical theatre for 100 years, a brass band for 120 years, a classical music group for 70 years, and the first purpose-built children’s theatre in the whole of the United Kingdom.

I ask Members to look at examples of seaside towns. Where arts come, regeneration follows. St Ives was regenerated around the Tate gallery. Margate is regenerating as we speak, as a result of Tracey Emin and her art. Southport is regenerating through the Gormley statues, and the billionaire Roger De Haan has invested his own money—tens of millions of pounds—in art and creativity to regenerate the town of Folkestone.

We should tap into the passion in the Chamber, so that we can be leaders in our towns and communities, and ensure that culture plays its proper part in the regeneration of our towns.

5.34 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing this debate. It is already clear that the case for a town of culture award is absolutely irresistible. I am sure the Minister will stand up and tell us that it is nailed on. The competition is so intense and the billionaire Roger De Haan has invested his own money—tens of millions of pounds—in art and creativity to regenerate the town of Folkestone.

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As my right hon. Friend said in opening the debate, the award is about aspiration, celebration and pride. It is about identity around people and place, and about culture. Those are all important things. Our towns are in danger of being forgotten a bit. Putting them on the map with a town of culture award would make a real difference.

Let me mention the three towns in my constituency. The town of Bottesford has the magnificent St Peter’s Church, and interesting cultural activities around Bottesford Beck, which spawns all sorts of interesting things. The town of Kirton-in-Lindsey celebrated its diamond jubilee town hall by renovating it in the 60th year of this Queen’s reign, although it was first put there in the 60th year of Victoria’s reign. The town of Scunthorpe has its magnificent steel heritage. Only a few weeks ago,
thanks to the work of Jim and Christine Pearson, former mayors of Scunthorpe, a steelworkers statue was unveiled. People thronged to see that. That is just one example of how culture lifts people’s spirits. The town of culture award will lift everyone’s spirits.

5.36 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): As the only south-west Member of Parliament here, I am here to speak up for the west country and our fantastic array of towns. There is so much more competition than just the excellent towns we have heard about from the north and from Wales; there are those in the west country, too. We are about so much more than clotted cream and whether it should be jam first or cream first. We have fantastic towns right across the region. We have the world heritage site at Tavistock; the Tate at St Ives; our Cornish tin mining museum; amazing food in Dartmouth; Fowey and its sailing; and Plymouth, the creator of the pasty, Plymouth Gin and the Mayflower Steps. The Mayflower Steps and the Mayflower story are so powerful.

We have the opportunity to tell stories that connect our towns right across the country, from Scrooby and Babworth in Bassettlaw to Gainsborough, Boston, Immingham, Harwich, Rotherhithe, Southampton, Dartmouth and Plymouth. We need not only to have a towns of culture competition, but to join up our towns, because telling the story of how our towns are connected will create more jobs and more passion. An awful lot of people are proud of their towns in the west country. This competition would be such a boost for that.

5.37 pm

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I fully support all those who have spoken. In particular, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing this debate on a wonderful idea.

The past few years have seen immense success for the UK city of culture, which has created renewed interest in those cities that have had successful bids. The bidding process has been beneficial even for cities that have not been successful. Crucially, it has showcased culture and arts outside London and the big metropolitan hubs. Government figures show that 53% of the population of England live in an urban settlement that is not part of a conurbation, but towns get less than half of the Arts Council funding that cities receive.

Towns are the fabric of our nation, and their cultural offer needs to be acknowledged, respected and celebrated. Unfortunately, too often they are the areas that are made to suffer as a result of private and public sector decisions, such as closures, underinvestment and consolidation in cities. When Hull’s year of culture was launched in 2017, there were unprecedented crowds; hundreds of thousands of people came from all over the country to celebrate. It was 12 months of visitors, events and inward investment in the city from tourism.

Many Members have mentioned their towns. I represent six. Like all small towns, there is an element of pride to them. Composers, bands, authors, scriptwriters, “Coronation Street” actors, artists, Dave Pearson, politicians come from the towns I represent. My home town of Accrington has the beautiful Haworth art gallery, with its Tiffany glass collection—the only one outside the United States. We also have the club that would not die, Accrington Stanley.

We have to go beyond arts and look at engineering and textiles in some of these proud towns. Accrington produces the hardest bricks ever produced; they prop up the Empire State building and others. I am trying to save a tower that dates from 1148, which is hard to do in a town where the local authority does not have the funding for that. Some of these towns suffered as a result of globalisation, and they need the resource and the support that cities get. A fraction of the £220 million that Hull received would go a long way.

I will conclude by saying that this is a fantastic initiative. I support this debate and personally congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn, who secured it. I hope the Minister listens and takes this initiative forward.

5.40 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing this debate. Yesterday was Great Grimsby Day. If Members did not know about that, they know about it now. They can put the date in their diary for next year and can expect something spectacular, because my town will be doing something amazing, thanks to a Labour council and Charlotte Bowen of the Culture House; I especially wanted to mention her tireless, assiduous efforts to bring a range of cultural activities to north-east Lincolnshire, and her assistance in securing the £3.2 million of Government funding for culture and arts that was recently announced. Members need to come and get involved in that.

Grimsby is a proud, tough, hard-working town full of committed and enthusiastic people who are keen to improve the area and make it a more desirable place to stay, work and play. On top of the exciting events and installations that we hope to see once this money comes through, we have had our town deal agreed. We have had agreements from the landowner and the port operator, Associated British Ports, that the famous Kasbah area of the Grimsby docks can start to be developed and opened up. It has received money from the Heritage Lottery Fund and has been given a boost by a company called Creative Start Art, which is taking up a tenancy to kick-start regeneration in the heritage action zone.

Culture comes in many different forms. Grimsby has not only a wonderful concert venue, the Grimsby central hall, which more people should go to, but the annual Bradley youth festival, which showcases local acting, musical and spoken word talent. We have an amazing arts section at the local college, which excels in designing for movies, doing makeup and theatre sets. We have the Caxton theatre, the auditorium in which Kevin from Grimsby will star in “Burn the Floor”; the fishing heritage centre; the Time Trap museum; and a range of knitters, sportspersons and dancers. The people of Grimsby know that they are much more than “Skint” and Sacha Baron Cohen’s “Grimsby” film. How wonderful it would be if we had the chance to put all those positive things together and won what will clearly be a much-coveted award.

5.42 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing the debate. Sir Walter Scott sat in the Boat Inn pub in the village where I live and drafted his novel...
“Ivanhoe”, inspired by Conisbrough castle. Ted Hughes lived in Mexborough, did his newspaper round through Old Denaby, and went on to write his famous poems. Of course there are others, such as Diana Rigg and Lesley Garrett, and let us not forget Brian Blessed—all home-grown in Doncaster.

Today’s debate is about having a showcase to celebrate our heritage and what we have achieved over the centuries in our towns and villages, but I would not like the Minister to think that this is all about the past. It is about the future as well; it is about creating new art, new music, new plays, new novels and new poems, as well as enriching a sense of aspiration within our communities. A person does not have to go to London or our cities to get a job as an actor, musician or artist, or to work in the creative sector. We can grow those sectors in the towns and villages of the UK. I hope the Minister will act quickly to establish the town of culture award.

5.43 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe, and I congratulate my colleague on the Select Committee on Justice, the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), on securing this debate. I am pleased that this ever-so-slightly oversubscribed debate is taking place, and I fully support the initiative that he set out so eloquently. I am not sure what the record is for the number of contributions in a 60-minute debate, but so far we have heard 19 passionate sales pitches on behalf of constituencies across England and Wales, and we are about to hear one from Scotland.

Jim Shannon: Northern Ireland as well.

Gavin Newlands: And from Northern Ireland, with apologies to the persistent hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I will come to him. We have heard so many pitches. In a 60-minute debate, we have heard from the right hon. Member for Delyn, and for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), the right hon. Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), and the hon. Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Strangford, for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), for High Peak (Ruth George), for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane), for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for Hyndburn (Graham Stringer), and for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). The strength of feeling is pretty clear.

It is vital that we recognise the value of our towns, big or small. They often have bigger personalities than cities many times bigger. I am proud to be an MP for my home town since I was four years old, has a proud history that few can match. Paisley can also boast of calling Gerry Rafferty, David Adam, the MSP for Paisley, often refers to it as the cradle of the royal Stuarts, as it was an early home to the family of Weir, and from Elderslie to Erskine, everywhere has something to offer. The historical capital of Renfrewshire, my home town since I was four years old, has a proud history that few can match. Renfrew is known worldwide, having given the world the famous pattern of the same name, which obviously would not happen in real life. Paisley was home to the world’s first constituted Burns club and is also home to the UK’s largest youth theatre, PACE, which has helped produce fantastic performers—this is where Paisley outshines the towns mentioned in the rest of the contributions, I would say—such as James McAvoy, Paolo Nutini and Richard Madden, who recently won a Golden Globe for his role in the BBC drama “The Bodyguard”, which featured a fantastical plot about a UK Government Minister up to no good, which obviously would not happen in real life. Paisley can also boast of calling Gerry Rafferty, David Tennant and Gerard Butler our own.

Paisley is not the only town or village in my constituency with a proud cultural heritage. From Bishopton to Bridge of Weir, and from Elderslie to Erskine, everywhere has something to offer. The historical capital of Renfrewshire, my home town since I was four years old, has a proud history that few can match. Renfrew is known as the cradle of the royal Stuarts, as it was an early home to the final royal family of the Kingdom of Scotland. In 1164 at the battle of Renfrew, King Malcolm IV of Scotland repelled Somerled, the Lord of the Isles.

We all have many towns and cities rich in history and culture, many of which miss out on vital investment. This proposed town of culture award would potentially unlock that investment and bring a sense of pride back to these places. My message to hon. Members across this House is that Renfrewshire stands ready to win any such award. I urge the Minister to take this proposal forward.
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): There is not a lot of time left, but I remind the Minister that he will not need long to say, “Yes,” in response to this debate. I endorse the proposal by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) and other hon. Friends. I congratulate the Labour Towns group on turning up en masse and coming up with such compelling arguments, as well as the other hon. Members who spoke. My right hon. Friend rightly said that there was an opportunity to do something on a UK basis and involve the devolved Administrations; I thought his proposals were very good. He also took some very good interventions, including those of my hon. Friends. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), who are no longer in their places, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). He mentioned Richard II and Flint castle; as he may know, my brother Patrick is an actor who once played a small part in promoting Flint indirectly—he starred in “Richard II” at the Globe theatre.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) spoke passionately about his constituency, putting to bed the reputation that it was perhaps unfairly given by John Betjeman. My hon. Friend quite rightly said that arts funding tends to be higher in cities than in towns—we really need to look at how to redistribute resources much more effectively through the arts budget.

It is always very comforting when the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) speaks in a debate—when he turns up, we know that things are normal in the world. He made his constituency sound like the garden of Eden, although I remind him that that is where original sin was invented. I look forward to playing crazy golf with him in Strangford some day.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) referred to Richard III—another king who met a dodgy end. I look forward to a long weekend in Bishop Auckland, which sounds like a wonderful place.

In reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones), may I take the opportunity to mention Rhosllanerchrugog? She took an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), who is no longer in his place. My mother was born in his constituency—in Nantyglo, another town that would really benefit from the sort of initiative we are debating.

As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) spoke passionately about her community. So did my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), who made the important remark: “If you don’t see it, you can’t be it.” I know that her constituency work is very much based on that idea. She took an intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George), who mentioned Buxton and the importance of cultural and artistic activities to health and wellbeing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) spoke passionately about Rhyl. I remind him of Cerys Matthews’s song “International Velvet”, in which she sang, “Darganfyddais gwir baradwys Rhyll”—“I discovered true paradise in Rhyl.” My hon. Friend reminded us to “tap into the passion”, and his speech certainly did that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) spoke brilliantly, rightly pointing out that the judging panel will have a difficult job. He also pointed out Scunthorpe’s steel heritage, which he knows that I share in my background.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) mentioned clotted cream and the question whether the jam or the cream should come first. What I say to the Minister is that we do not mind which it is—as long as it is not “jam tomorrow.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) spoke, and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) spoke brilliantly about the welcome investment in the arts in her community. My right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) promoted her constituency, as ever, and gave us a remarkable list of people from it who have risen to prominence—they have a very prominent MP as well. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) spoke for the Scottish National party.

I represent a city seat, but I was born and brought up in Cwmbran, a new town. Every time I drive back to see my 89-year-old mother, a song comes into my head: Simon and Garfunkel’s “My Little Town”. One of the lyrics is:

“After it rains, there’s a rainbow, and all of the colors are black.

It’s not that the colors aren’t there—it’s just imagination they lack.”

If we have the imagination and the investment, we can do wonderful things. We all know what has happened to our towns through the evisceration of local government funding, the removal of services from our high streets and the loss of banks, libraries and museums. Those institutions are very important. Let us have a renaissance in our towns, let us have a town of culture, and let us hear the Minister say yes.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): It is a real pleasure to close this debate. Mr McCabe. I thank the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) for securing it and all hon. Members present for their valuable contributions and advertisements for their towns or localities. I also thank those hon. Members who co-signed the letter to the Secretary of State asking that our Department establish a town of culture award.

I am thrilled with this debate, because it really is recognition of the value of culture generally, which we all know about; as Culture Minister, people would expect me to say that. I have been to 35 locations around the country in the past 12 months and seen the value of culture in towns, villages and cities alike, and how important it is for society as a whole.

I join colleagues in celebrating the rich heritage and culture of towns across the UK. I must confess to being possibly a little biased in favour of this motion, as my own constituency is in a town. Of course that town is possibly a little biased in favour of this motion, as my own constituency is in a town. Of course that town is Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) spoke, and my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George), who mentioned Buxton and the importance of cultural and artistic activities to health and wellbeing.

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communities better places to live in. A Conservative colleague suggested recently that we should also have a county of culture. Culture goes across the board.

As the right hon. Member for Delyn has highlighted it, I will say something about the UK city of culture award, because it has a powerful social and economic impact on the winning bidders. Hull 2017, which has been alluded to, leveraged truly enormous private investment and generated £300 million through increased tourism alone.

I understand the potential for arts and culture to transform communities, which is why a range of places, including towns, can already enter the UK city of culture competition. Of course I recognise that towns will have a lot to compete against when they come up against cities in the same competition. The bidding process for the title of the 2021 UK city of culture, which was awarded to Coventry, invited bids from cities and towns, and it allowed partnership bids from two or more neighbouring cities or towns, or from a closely linked set of urban areas. That is one way of dealing with this issue.

It is for individual places to weigh the benefits of bidding, in terms of galvanising local partners and raising the profile of the place, compared with the costs of putting together a bid. I am currently reviewing the criteria for any future competitions and will continue to keep under careful consideration the offer to towns, as well as the burden of bidding. This debate has been very influential in that regard, so I again congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing it.

Kevin Brennan: It is welcome that the Minister is reviewing the competition criteria. When does he expect to report back on his conclusions?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Gentleman will be among the first to know. Of course, there are already a number of Government-wide initiatives to invest in our towns and high streets. I have only a few minutes left to highlight some of them; indeed, some have already been alluded to by hon. Members.

I am also keeping under careful consideration the effectiveness of different types of support to help towns and other places to prosper. Wider Government support for towns and high streets includes, of course, the future high streets fund, which is worth £675 million. It was announced in the autumn Budget to encourage vibrant town centres where people can live, shop and spend leisure time.

The prospectus for that fund was only published in December. It invites local authorities to submit expressions of interest for capital funding. There is a lot of money available, so I encourage hon. Members to invite their local authorities to take an interest in the fund and submit expressions of interest.

Of course, DCMS-related sectors contribute to successful and healthy high streets, and it is key that they do so. The Royal Society for Public Health report, “Health on the High Street: Running on Empty 2018”, found that residents of towns with healthy high streets live on average two and a half years longer, and that libraries, museums and galleries contribute to the healthiest high streets. Culture has a powerful health as well as wellbeing benefit, and has a positive cultural impact.

The Government’s plan for the high street also includes the creation of a high street taskforce in 2019 to support local leaders. The Government already run the Great British High Street awards, a hotly contested competition to find Britain’s best high street. Crickhowell was announced as the overall UK winner for 2018, and I was delighted to see Crickhowell in my town of Northampton win the category in 2015. Towns can win, and this competition enables towns to raise their profile and celebrate local efforts to create vibrant town centres that are loved by their communities.

David Hanson: Just before the Minister finishes, I want to try to tie him down. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has written to ask for a meeting with Members of Parliament to discuss this process further. Will he and the Secretary of State agree to attend the meeting?

Michael Ellis: I cannot speak for the Secretary of State, but I will agree to meet. We will set that up, and I am happy to do so.

My Department believes that place-based cultural investment should be a key part of the local growth strategy for all towns and cities in England. The cultural development fund, which has already been mentioned and was launched in 2018, is a £20 million competitive fund to support towns and cities to develop and implement transformative, cultural and creative growth plans. Just last week the Secretary of State announced the winners: Grimsby, Plymouth, the Thames estuary, Wakefield and Worcester.

Grimsby will receive £3.2 million to deliver a new programme of international events and public art to revive the town centre, provide a business support programme for local creative businesses, and create new production facilities in the town’s historic centre. The Thames estuary will receive £4.3 million. The cultural development fund and the UK city of culture projects are exemplars of local enterprise partnerships. We also welcome the innovation of local areas developing their own initiatives to celebrate local culture. For example, the Liverpool borough of culture and the London borough of culture are attempts to broaden the impacts of cultural titles and moments to areas beyond city centres.

I want to stick up for Arts Council England. Some 75% of its funding goes outside London—it is being distributed widely. We of course have to bear in mind that large centres of population are within cities, but my experience of Arts Council England is that it recognises that its role is to spread its resources around the country, which it is doing. Some 9.2 million people saw British Museum exhibitions and objects on show outside the museum in 2017–18, and more than 2,500 objects were loaned to 126 venues around the country.

A lot of work is already being done in this area. I am very happy to meet colleagues and interested partners to discuss the matter further, and I am keeping the situation under review. My Department and the Government recognise the value of culture. It is a precious part of our community life and has multiple assets and benefits. We will continue to support it.
Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Do you want to make a concluding remark, Mr Hanson?

David Hanson: I thank all Members who have turned up today. I thank the Minister for his positive response, and we will be in touch to make further progress. The time has come to encourage economic development in our towns on a cultural basis.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the establishment of a town of culture award.

6.3 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 24 January 2019

[Ms Karen Buck in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Knife Crime

1.30 pm

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tackling knife crime.

It is always a pleasure to serve when you are in the Chair, Ms Buck. First of all, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing a debate about this hugely important issue. In particular, I thank its Chair—my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns)—as well as the other members of the Committee and its Clerk, Sarah Hartwell-Naguib, who has been extremely helpful in assisting me to put together this debate.

The main spring for the debate was, very sadly, the murder of 14-year-old Jaden Moodie just over two weeks ago. The attack took place in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), albeit right on its boundary with my constituency of Leyton and Wanstead. The family live in Walthamstow. Both of my Waltham Forest neighbours—my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow and the right hon. Member for Walthamstow and the right hon. Member for Waltham Forest (John Cryer) and the right hon. Member for Waltham Forest and Redbridge (Mr Duncan Smith)—will speak later in the debate.

To many people, that appalling incident in Leyton two weeks ago was a new low in a wave of violent crime that has been sweeping across and beyond London, because we are dealing with county lines and all sorts of other related issues. That wave of violent crime seemed to start some months ago and it has not abated; there is no sign that this knife and gun crime is going to disappear, and we have become quite used to it.

Before I continue, I would like apologise on behalf of two hon. Members who supported my application for this debate, but who unfortunately cannot be here today. Over the past few months, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) has, week in, week out, during business questions and Home Office questions, raised concerns about problems in his constituency. I also apologise on behalf of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who chairs the Select Committee on Science and Technology, which recently completed a report on adverse childhood experiences. It covered trauma, abuse, neglect and so on, and found a clear correlation between those experiences, school exclusion and mental health problems. It also found that early intervention—on which the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has done a great deal of work—is vital, and many other reports have come to the same conclusion.

To some extent, we have become inured to the violence on our streets. It is certainly happening across east London, but it is also happening elsewhere in the country. Every week there seem to be more news stories about stabbings, gun crime and related activities. However, what happened a couple of weeks ago seems to an awful lot of people to be a new low. To some extent—I am not talking about specific cases, but speaking in generalities—there have been profound shifts in society and profound changes in the way in which society is structured and how people live. A lot of those profound changes underlie what we have seen over the past few months or the past year. Structures that used to provide security and safety, particularly for children, have been undermined and in some cases have completely disappeared.

I have met and dealt with many youngsters who come from profoundly chaotic backgrounds and have become involved in gangs, partly because doing so provides them with some sort of security. To give a couple of examples—I cannot give too many, because I am talking about people in my constituency and they might be identified—a few months ago I remember meeting a 14-year-old whose father was in prison and whose mother had just disappeared. He was living by himself in a council flat and having to look after himself at the age of 14. A person does not stand much of a chance in those circumstances. I can remember another, slightly older but not much older, who was living in a bail hostel 20 miles from Waltham Forest and whose exclusion order meant that he could not go to Waltham Forest. I am not commenting on the rights and wrongs of what he had done—which I am familiar with but do not want to talk about—but those two cases give a sense of the gravity of the situation and the shifts we are dealing with.

There is no magic wand for youngsters in that position; there is no magic bullet that will sort it all out and make their lives so much more secure, happier and safer. However, we cannot just throw up our hands and say, “It is all far too complicated. It is all far too profound and difficult, and there is nothing we can do about it.” To even start to tackle these issues, we need to start to talk about resources, because at the moment they are simply not there to cope with the consequences—I am talking to an extent about consequences, rather than the root cause.

I will come on to the root cause in a little while, but we certainly need early intervention. We need the resources to tackle both the causes and the consequences, and the stark reality is that the resources are not there. Both Waltham Forest and Redbridge—I cover six wards in Waltham Forest and two and one third in Redbridge—have faced huge cuts in the numbers of police officers. The exact numbers are not clear, but there have certainly been profound and extensive cuts in the numbers of officers.

Police stations have also been closed. When I was elected MP for Leyton and Wanstead nearly nine years ago, there were three police stations in my constituency. Now, there are none. Every single one has closed. Wanstead police station was one of the oldest in London, and while this is slightly beside the point of the debate, its closure seems to have led to a very sharp rise in burglaries in my constituency, particularly aggravated burglaries. It seems like common sense that if a police station has to come from Ilford—which is quite a long way away—rather than Wanstead itself, burglars are going to work out that that is the case. We have therefore seen a rise in aggravated burglary rates in Romford, with associated violence in many cases.
Waltham Forest has one of the highest rates of serious youth violence in London. To give one example, in 2017-18 the rate for serious youth violence leading to injury was 9.9 per thousand of the population. That is 18% above the London average, and with a clear upward trend over not just the past year or two, but year after year.

As an aside, it is a historical quirk that Waltham Forest has been categorised as an outer London borough. The reality is that we are dealing with virtually all of the serious problems experienced by inner London boroughs, but because of the strange decision made in 1964—the year I was born, so it is going back a while; well, not that far, but Members know what I mean—we are regarded as an outer London borough. I have always thought that the judgment made all those years ago was perverse. If Waltham Forest were categorised as an inner London borough, there would at least be some further resources available for police and other agencies.

In the 12 months to July 2018, Waltham Forest experienced the sixth highest volume of knife crime resulting in injuries—not knife crime per se, but knife crime leading to serious injury—to young people in London. At the same time, there seems to have been a rise in the number of schoolchildren, including those as young as year 6, getting involved in gang activity. Again, those are all upward trends; it is not that there has been a levelling off or that the numbers have been going up over just the past year or two. Year after year, there has been an upward trend in involvement in gang activity and in knife crime and related activities.

For some time, Waltham Forest Council has run a widely praised anti-gang strategy and a violence reduction unit, but that council has lost well over £100 million in central Government funding over the past few years. Redbridge has lost a similar sum, so across both boroughs, perhaps £250 million in central Government funding has been lost. The local police and council, among other agencies, are working together, as we are regularly and rightly told to do by Ministers. I am keen to praise those police officers, social workers, volunteers and many others who work long and hard to prevent violent crime and to tackle its consequences.

To address those fundamental issues against a background of a huge loss of resources places those agencies, volunteers, officers and social workers in an impossible position. Sometimes it is an actively dangerous position. That is why it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit social workers, particularly for youth services. The physical danger is obvious. They have had a pay freeze and they have not got the support, so it is no wonder that they are not joining the service. Between 2011 and 2017, Waltham Forest’s youth service budget suffered cuts amounting to 67%. We have reached a stage where we have hardly any youth social workers left in Waltham Forest, which is one of the biggest boroughs in London in terms of square footage or acreage. We have a youth service today that has been decimated by the cuts.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend, who is making a powerful speech. In Nottingham, we face a similar situation to the one he faces in London. He mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). Resources for youth services are crucial for diversionary activities for, let us face it, young boys in particular, so that they can go into positive pursuits such as sport and so forth—that absorb their energies and take their attention away from perhaps less productive activities. He is absolutely making the right point. I hope he will extract some change in policy from the Minister.

John Cryer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We are talking about prevention rather than cure, and it is always better to engage in a policy of prevention. I will say one thing that slightly contradicts what he said, which is that, increasingly, girls are getting involved in gang activity. At one time it was very much male-dominated. To some extent that is still the case, but there are increasing numbers of female gang members getting involved in related criminal activity. We are certainly seeing that across east London, at least.

As well as youth services being cut to the bone in Waltham Forest, mental health services are also being cut. Many Ministers have said over the years that mental health services have been seen as a poor relation in the national health service, and that has to change. There is little sign of that changing when mental health facilities are closing on a regular basis, including in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow, when budgets are being squeezed and when posts are being left open. We are talking about preventive activity, rather than cure, and mental health services are doing that right on the frontline. It is better to start there, rather than tackling the consequences when things have gone completely wrong.

It is worth mentioning some of the Mayor’s initiatives, including the London-wide violent crime taskforce, the Young Londoners fund and increased investment in the London gang exit service. The Young Londoners fund is £45 million, which sounds like a large amount of money—actually, it is—but that is spread across one of the biggest cities on the planet. It does not go very far per borough, despite the best efforts of the Assembly and the Mayor. City Hall has a London-wide programme to provide knife wands to every school, but, again, that deals only with the consequences. When we get to a stage where we are using knife wands in schools, including primary schools, we are in a pretty desperate area. We have to deal with the causes, not use knife wands, which are hardly a magic bullet in anyone’s analysis.

We desperately need joined-up policy approaches and joined-up working between the various agencies. Ministers regularly and rightly talk about that, but we also need a properly resourced range of agencies. It is not just about the police; there are the local authorities and the voluntary services, many of whose budgets are being cut or have even disappeared. People are working increasingly long and hard to prevent the sort of problems under discussion. I will mention for a second time the efforts of social workers, police officers and others who put in a tremendous effort to try to make our society better, but it is an uphill battle because they do not have the resources any more, given the profound cuts.

We are getting to the stage where there needs to be an inquiry into youth crime and related activities. Perhaps that should be a Select Committee inquiry, but we have had those in the past. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) is leading a violent crime inquiry, but I wonder whether we could have an
Minister’s response.

like a public inquiry, and I am interested to hear the have a history of that kind of criminal activity. I would they are causing mayhem, often in areas that do not south-east, Essex and Kent are all affected by the issue. parts of the country. The midlands, the north, the wave of crime sweeping across London.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) said, the wave is also sweeping across other parts of the country. The midlands, the north, the southeast, Essex and Kent are all affected by the issue. County lines are reaching out further and further, and they are causing mayhem, often in areas that do not have a history of that kind of criminal activity. I would like a public inquiry, and I am interested to hear the Minister’s response.

1.46 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I had not expected to be called so early, Ms Buck, so I have rather been taken by surprise. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) for securing this important and timely debate. He is my predecessor as MP for Hornchurch, so he will no doubt share my concern that the London Borough of Havering, while still a low-crime borough, has seen a worrying rise in gang activity, particularly focused around the economic hub of Romford. We have regrettably seen the use of knives in a number of recent incidents.

While my constituency has not experienced the same level of gang activity, when a crime involving a knife takes place it sends shockwaves through the community. One phenomenon we have recently experienced is young people from neighbouring boroughs using the transport system to come into economic hubs such as Upminster and Hornchurch to intimidate shopkeepers with threats of weapons and to mug schoolchildren, who often might be carrying a parent’s credit card, or using or wearing expensive technology or clothing.

My constituents rightly ask whether the police have enough funding, and that undoubtedly must be a priority area for Government going forward. Thankfully, that has been recognised. Following meetings before Christmas with the Home Secretary and Prime Minister, I was pleased to see that the funding available to police and crime commissioners will be increased by up to £813 million. That is the biggest annual increase since 2010; it protects the Met’s grant funding in real terms and gives the Mayor the chance to raise an additional £81 million if he deems it necessary. That means that the Met will see a total increase in funding of up to £172 million next year. I very much hope that some of that can be dedicated to a more visible policing operation and to looking at previously successful operations with knife arches and amnesties.

Money needs to be concentrated not just on an increased police presence on our streets, but on analysts and detectives who can look at crime trends and build strong cases against criminals higher up the food chain. I was interested to read some of the reports last year from the National Crime Agency, which attributed some of the increase in street violence to the tightening grip of Albanian crime gangs on the UK’s cocaine market. By forming direct relationships with producers and linking with existing UK gangs, Albanian crime gangs have been able to lower the cost of cocaine, making it more affordable for smaller, younger street gangs to get involved in drug dealing. The lure of easy money and a sense of disenfranchisement from mainstream society regrettably mean that a ready supply of teenagers have been willing to act as drug runners. Vicious disputes and rivalries between such gangs, often ramped up on social media, have led to the completely needless deaths of children.

We must therefore focus on cracking down on other parts of the crime chain, while pulling vulnerable young people in a more positive direction. It has been noted today, and by crime analysts, that many of the young people we are losing to knife crime were not attending school. I very much welcome Ofsted’s focus on school exclusions as a performance measure going forward, but, as has been noted, pressures on other services have led to gaps through which vulnerable young people are falling.

Last year, I met Sally Miller, a councillor in Elm Park who acts as an appropriate adult for young people involved in crime. That has led her to witness countless interviews between the police and young people who have been arrested for carrying a blade. One of her consistent observations is how little those young people fear being referred to youth offending teams.

Havering appears to have a well-performing youth offending team with good outcomes, but in this context good outcomes means a 33% reoffending rate, compared with a national average of 42%. A third of young people reoffending in our borough is still too high. A tendency to reoffend is much more common in complex cases where children have grown up in households in which violence is commonplace, school is seen as optional, and the abuse of drugs and alcohol is the norm.

When I wrote to the Ministry of Justice about youth offending teams, it was suggested to me that, when sentencing children, we ought to look at not only deterrence but the child’s welfare and the aim of preventing reoffending. That is where the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead raised many valid points about gaps in local authority services and social services.

The most intensive of the community sentences used by youth offending teams is a youth rehabilitation order. That can include up to 18 requirements, including electronic monitoring and curfew, unpaid work, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health treatment, and education. Such interventions require the system to be firing on many cylinders.

I was pleased to see the Education Secretary dedicate more funding recently to special educational needs, which can affect many of the young people involved in this kind of crime. I also commend the work of the third sector in trying to encourage young people away from crime. Tomorrow I will attend an assembly about Harold Hill by the charity You and Me to see how it equips young people with the confidence to step away from negative spirals of activity.

Will the Minister let us know whether police resources are being kept under review, in spite of the increases to which I referred? I am also keen to hear about progress
in the National Crime Agency on cracking down on international drug dealers, including whether there have been any deportations and whether the NCA is working in-country with international police forces to crack down on international crime operations.

Finally, I would be grateful for the Minister’s comments on whether she feels her own work on serious violence is undermined by gaps in other interventions, whether that be social care pressures, strain on addiction services or gaps within schools, and on what work she may be doing with social media companies and Ofsted to address some of the social pressures that young people are under.

1.52 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is always a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck.

As hon. Members may know, between January 2017 and March last year, nine young people in my constituency were murdered, mostly by knives. Since last March, we have been incredibly fortunate that no more children have died, but I have to say that that is a really strange thing to feel thankful for. The reprieve is making it possible for my community to begin to heal, and I can only pray that that lull in violence continues.

Healing is hard—not just for families, friends and witnesses, who are so devastated and traumatised by what they have seen, but for communities. In Forest Gate, children were taken away again and again. It was horribly traumatic. There was palpable fear and a feeling of shock on the streets. I would walk into a shop, and all people would talk to me about what had happened last week, last month and the month before. They wanted to know what we were doing about it.

Last September, I gave a speech in which I made seven asks of Government. One was for a rapid and professional mental health response to be available for communities in the wake of tragedies and trauma, such as the murder of a child. With mental health services so overstretched in most areas—especially child and adolescent mental health services—that support is often not there. Even as I held in my arms a young man who was sobbing because he had held a dying friend, I knew that he was not going to get the support that he needed at the time that he needed it, and nor were his friends.

On that, I am glad to say that the Government have responded and engaged with me positively. I recently met the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who listened, as she does, with sympathy. I am working with the East London NHS Foundation Trust and other leading mental health bodies to try to find a model that will be effective, and I hope that we will look at piloting services soon.

My community has been calmer, but do not be deceived. The drivers of the violence have not gone away—far from it. The second of my seven asks was for the police and the courts to focus on those who are driving much of the violence for profit by grooming and exploiting children as cheap and disposable labour in the quest to sell drugs across the county lines. I am grateful that the Minister for Security has engaged with me on that, and I am expecting a confidential update on progress from the National Crime Agency soon—I hope this speech will prompt the Government to make that very soon.
colleague the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and I have discussed how to deal with knife crime, which is a problem nationally, a problem in London and a particular problem in the borough that the three of us represent. I will take each aspect of the problem in order.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to the debate. The issue of knife crime tends to be shovelled away because the media too often see it as a spat between members of different gangs; it only ever breaks the surface when somebody they cannot pigeonhole is abused or murdered, as in the terrible event that happened recently in the hon. Lady’s constituency. I pay tribute to the victim’s family for their behaviour and their demeanour—our hearts go out to them. Yet somehow the media’s game always seems to be, “As long as it is not people we think are important, it is acceptable.” I will cite some figures later to suggest why that is the case.

Violent crime is increasing, not just in London but across the country. It exacts a terrible toll on our most disadvantaged and impoverished communities. The London murder rate has reached the highest level for a decade, with stabblings and shootings often linked to gangs and the supply of drugs. People often say that a lot of it is not related to the gangs, but even when the gangs are not directly involved, the gang culture on our streets has a massive effect on young people’s behaviour, even if only defensively. Many who are not involved in the gangs end up being bullied or coerced for not wanting to be part of the process, and sometimes they succumb and find themselves trapped. The gang culture is sapping away at some of the best of our young people; they are exchanging their future prospects in return for short-term gain, or what appears to be gain.

In London alone, more than 25,000 incidents of serious violence were recorded across the 32 boroughs in the 12 months to the end of June 2018. Most of those incidents were completely unreported to the general public, except maybe in the local area. In my borough, Waltham Forest, the number of knife crime offences was 27.34% higher than in the previous year. This is a growing problem. Intriguingly for the three of us who represent the borough, the increase in knife crime in Waltham Forest is significantly greater than in the Metropolitan police service area as a whole. We have a local problem, a city-wide problem and a national problem.

Violence against the person has been on an upward trajectory in the borough for several years. Since 2010, there have been an average of 525 violent crimes per month, but there has been only one month since April 2015 with fewer than that. That is a shocking statistic that tells us what a daily event knife crime is. I saw that at first hand when I went out recently with a police patrol—I am sure many other hon. Members present have done the same. It was on a Friday afternoon, not a Friday night; everyone assumes that things are all right in the afternoon, but in the space of three and half hours we attended one shooting, two stabblings and a knife threat to a family.

The police said, “This is not prime time—it will really kick off after you’ve gone.” That tells us just about everything we need to know. We went at speed up and down the borough—from one end of my constituency to the bottom of the constituency of the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead. I swear to God: it was an eye-opener. I did not think my eyes needed opening, but I was wide-eyed by the time we had finished.

Commentators too often say that London is a city of 8 million, with 19 million annual visitors, so the level of violence is a problem but not a crisis. I have read articles that say, “Yes, we are awfully fussed about this, but it is contained.” That is shocking. Tell that to the families whose children have been damaged or murdered, or to the communities that have been blighted.

It all comes back to the point about culture, because the gang culture blights whole areas. Shops do not open in areas where the gangs operate significantly, because they come under threat. Kids who go there come under threat, too, so the streets become less occupied and people are more worried about going there. There are families whose children are being bullied and are frightened to go out, because they know that they will meet a gang member who will tell them that unless they get involved, something will happen to their families. People disappear from public spaces, and parts of our city end up deserted by decent people because they are frightened and worried. Even if they have not seen anything, hearsay tells them that things are going on in their area.

The point of challenging knife crime is not just that we are worried about violence and crime, but that we are worried about our communities not thriving as they could—their economies are bad, jobs are going and all the rest of it. We need to see the issue in a wider context, because it is about the health of a city.

A decade ago, the Centre for Social Justice, an independent organisation that I am part of, set up a programme to investigate what was going on in cities and look at what had gone right elsewhere. Its report, “Dying to Belong”, was about the nature of the people who end up locked into gangs. We commissioned its authors to look at cities that have had the problem, possibly for longer than London: they went to America and looked at Los Angeles, Cincinnati, Boston and even New York, and then they came back and looked at Glasgow and Liverpool. The Glasgow experience was particularly interesting, and so was the Matrix project in Liverpool; it was perhaps not as comprehensive as the Glasgow model, but it had some similar and very interesting outcomes.

What came across constantly from those visits was that the cities that have successfully controlled their levels of gang activity, and thus violence and violent crime, have all used a two-pronged process. First, policing needs to be absolutely and conclusively co-ordinated with the local area. I accept that the word “consent” is bandied around, but it is more a case of co-operation, understanding, shared intelligence and a sense of where and who to police.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the loss of neighbourhood policing has had a major impact on the situation he describes? The sense of communities working with the police has been shattered.

Mr Duncan Smith: Yes—I will come on to that point. It is about intelligence on the streets, both for the communities and the police, and the operational matter of how to target policing.
What came across from Boston and Cincinnati was particularly interesting. Their gangs were very similar to London’s: they tended to be multi-racial in the sense that, unlike in Los Angeles, they were postcode gangs. Some of the postcodes were drawn from whoever lived in the community and reflecting the balance of people in the community. In Boston, Operation Ceasefire led to a 63% reduction in youth homicides. The level of violence is different in American cities, mostly because of firearms, but the overall suppression as a result of the operation is staggering. The figures suggest that violence has continued to reduce and have remained low because it is a permanent process. It is not about the police arriving in a borough, targeting people for nine months and then going somewhere else; it is constant, perpetual and part of the community.

The interesting point about the findings and the recommendations of that report is that, too often, we just focus on one or the other. I want to come to the comment made by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). Since the report was published, too little of it has been implemented around the UK. There was lots of talk. I talked at length at that time to the Labour Government—it was published under the last Labour Government. There was lots of interest in wanting to take it forward, but the issue comes down to the activity of the cities and the boroughs themselves—they have to want to take the decisions. There are issues for the Government, which are clearly to do with funding and organisation, but there are also issues to do with the local areas.

In the areas where they did pretty much next to nothing about the issue following the report, and carried on in the same way, some 700 young people have been fatally stabbed and shot. I believe those are 700 young people we could have saved, had we operated across the board, comprehensively. The level of co-operation, co-ordination and joint activity is a problem for London, with its 32 boroughs.

I had very interesting dealings with Waltham Forest Council at the time. It is a Labour-controlled council, and has been for some time, but the reality is that, more important, there was lots of talk. I talked at length to the 46% fall in violent offences, a 73% fall in gang in-fighting and an 85% fall in weapon possession. They call it a health programme, because they talk about the community work at the same time, and co-operation with the health department and the intelligence that is necessary. It is not just about policing.

If it had just been about policing, there would have been a moment when they had reduced the level of crime, but that could not have been sustained forever, because there would have been no stoppage. As they said, they needed to get to the younger kids in the gangs and take them out of the gangs, into remedial work, through community groups and other groups that work to change educational outcomes and that get them re-stabilised—perhaps there is an unstable family, or a family who are threatened and need to be moved. All that has to happen at a community level and be led at the bottom, and it requires us to ask how we focus in on the necessary funding—not just across the board, but in the areas most greatly threatened by gang violence. It is perhaps time for us to ask whether specific areas and councils need a more targeted approach to support them.

Too often, that sort of process is effectively forgotten. I mentioned two cities in the UK that genuinely set about the process, but in all the rest, on all the visits I have been on, the work is patchy. As a result, we thought we needed to look at that report again. I say that as a member, as others are, of the Government’s violence taskforce, which is very helpful for presenting the case to the Government. I genuinely do think the Government are now seized of the need to resolve the situation.

The things that need to be done are not rocket science and they are not new. Although we talk about county lines and the way the drugs trade is changing and stretching out from London, in the end it all comes down to gang activity. If the young kids are able to be in the gangs, the gangs can operate. If the gangs do not have the young kids coming into them, then they die. The guys at the top of the gang cannot operate without the runners and the young kids taking stuff from A to B, collecting the money and doing all the legwork, away from them. Those are the young people they need and they are the ones they threaten, so the community-level approach of stripping those young people out of the gangs is vital.

The police can target the top of the gangs, take them out and put them through the criminal justice system—throw the book at them—and police them on the streets and do their stop and search through intelligence-led processes. However, as the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead said earlier, the reality is about getting the young kids out. It is about them leaving the gangs and taking them out. It is not even early intervention—it is after the event. Even when they have gone into the gangs, we have to bring them out, take them away and get them through other work. Where that is done, as it has been seen and done in those cities, almost immediately the gangs begin to fold in on themselves. It does not matter who is running them—it does not matter if we are talking about the Mali Boys or whoever—the truth is that, at the end of the day, the top guys in these gangs do not operate if they do not have the young kids running and doing the work for them. If we can get to them, it strengthens the policing activity.
We cannot police our way out of this. We need organisations such as those I visited in south London, such as XLP and London Gang Exit, or Gangs Unite up in our area, Key4Life and Growing Against Violence. There are lots and lots of groups who do fantastic work in changing the nature of what goes on.

I have a very simple message. All the patterns and strands of work—from aggressive but targeted policing, through community work and the council working together, all rely on something very important. This is the last strand of what I was talking about, and it is in the book we published.

It is absolutely vital that all the Government agencies and local government agencies sign up to working closely together. Too often in the past, that has not happened with some Government Departments. I say this regretfully, but having talked to the areas that have addressed this issue, I think the most difficult Department to get involved in the giving of intelligence is the Department of Health and Social Care. It holds its intelligence very carefully and worries about it going out. In many households, the health visitor is the first person they will have in and the very last person they will eventually chuck out if they are worried about life. Health visitors hold a wealth of information about the problems of certain families. We need to find a way to use that intelligence.

We talk about early intervention. There are a wealth of signposts when it comes to kids who are excluded from school or playing truant, or families who we know are dysfunctional or already have problems or criminal activity in them. When I went to visit the programmes up in Glasgow, they pointed out to me that too often the courts are simply unaware of the kind of street that they are about to place the kids back into, or the worries about the families. More than that, they talked about why young people in certain areas will not travel to work and take jobs: if the normal map is overlaid with the gangs map, it is immediately obvious why. The young people will not cross the gang areas because they are frightened about crossing, being seen and getting caught.

Cross-party, throughout the Government and local authorities, and through community groups, we have to make a real pledge that we are not going to let this problem go on any longer—that in my borough and others, we will now work together. If money is required for funding, we must find it and make sure it is targeted. We cannot make political capital out of this issue. We have a duty to ensure that the next generation that comes through are not blighted by the times of the last.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): We could not have had a better Chair for today’s debate, Ms Buck, given your expertise and experience on this subject, so it is wonderful to serve under your chairmanship.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) for all his hard work in getting this debate from the Backbench Business Committee, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who I know is sad he cannot be here today, but, first and foremost, I pay tribute to the family of Jaden Moodie, who are with us today. They have shown incredible courage and strength at such a difficult time by being here and being so determined about the future.
ethos, as John Pitts calls it, and young people are being sent through county lines all around the country to make money for the elders.

The National Crime Agency found that 88% of areas now report county lines activity—a phenomenon that has grown only in the past few years. It means that what is happening in our capital city is affecting everyone in our country. And, yes, young women are involved too: 90% of those areas saw young women involved in county lines activity.

The gangs picture changes so quickly, but the young people who matter, and who are at the heart of this, do not. We think we have about 12, or possibly 13, serious gangs in Waltham Forest. Of those 12 gangs, only four were active a few years ago. The situation is changing and calls for a local response.

Some people have talked about middle-class drug users and the way they are driving the situation. It is important that we recognise, particularly in our local community in Waltham Forest, that people are trading in small amounts of drugs, which is pushing people into gangs. Some young people are being sent miles to make just £5. They are selling to everybody, and we need policing to be able to disrupt those chains of distribution. Anybody who tells you that policing does not matter is not living through this crisis. Our local community in Waltham Forest has lost 200 police in the past couple of years alone. Our police work hard to identify these young people and to work with our social workers and youth workers. Two hundred police have gone, which means there are 200 fewer people to help do that work—gathering intelligence, building the confidence of the local community, and interrupting and disrupting that behaviour.

We know it is not just about drugs. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead talked powerfully about the importance of social work. I want to talk about the importance of schools and, as I said, to see the children behind these figures who are falling through the cracks. When we do, we see so many similar issues in the stories they tell, which is why this debate is so important. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) is right to say that this is not a new phenomenon. The gangs might be changing, but we know what works. We know how we can help and step in to support families—not to demonise them, but to recognise their value to our communities.

We know that the motivations for joining gangs and getting involved in violence are complex. Yes, poverty and racism play an important part, but it is also about schools, geographical communities and the support networks—the strong and weak ones—around our young people. We see the grooming process start early, often with children as young as 10. Frankly, sometimes the interventions that we see are just too late in that chain of process, which is why I pay tribute to my local authority for the work it is doing. It recognises that young people under 18 who are involved in this activity are being criminally exploited and that they need protection and support. I also want to put on record my thanks to Gedling Council for the work it has been doing not just to support Jaden’s family, but to recognise some of the interconnections.

I know that Members will talk about early trauma, about a public health model and about how contagious these problems are. My local authority, like the Mayor of London, recognises that our schools are struggling to cope with the early presentation of these problems. How do we help young people who might be struggling at school and who have problems in their family? We need more than warm words; we need funding, and we need to recognise what we are fighting for: not just to stop the violence, but for a future for each of those young people.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) mentioned exclusions, which is really what I want the Minister to comment on. Looking at the many letters that she has written to me about this issue, it feels like we look too often at what happens when violence occurs, yet we know that exclusions are a common theme in some of the stories we are talking about. Indeed, 41 pupils a day were permanently excluded last year from schools in this country. There were 19 permanent exclusions in my local authority alone, which is actually below the national average. There are 115 children in our pupil referral units, which suggests that there are many more children who need support and intervention but who are not being picked up through the process of being categorised as excluded.

The all-party parliamentary group on knife crime found that one in three local authorities has no vacancies in their pupil referral unit. Those young people are the most vulnerable. They might be a minority of the school population, but they go on to be a majority of our prison population. They are 10 times more likely to have a mental health need, 20 times more likely to be subject to social services intervention, and 100 times more likely to commit an offence of knife possession. If we work with these young people now and recognise their value, we can stop many of these problems and break some of these cycles. I also say to the Minister that, frankly, we can save money. Every excluded pupil will cost £370,000 over their lifetime in terms of extra education, benefits, healthcare and the criminal justice system. That is a total of £2.9 billion lost to the Exchequer by permanently excluding just 7,000 pupils.

The Pitts research on Waltham Forest bears out what we are talking about in terms of those young people who are vulnerable and being exploited. One professional said:

“That’s the level of ruthlessness of these gangs, they will recruit these kids and basically just use them as a piece of meat for whatever purpose they’ve got.”

Another said:

“Youngers are normally easier to influence, when they are at school.”

However, the honest truth is that the Home Office’s work on violent crime—it is very commendable that the Home Office has started to look at it—is not working in schools and does not recognise that localised approach. A gang’s position in my local community will be different from a gang’s position south of the river, in south London. That work needs local people who see those young people, who see the warning signs and who see why it is worth fighting for their future.

I know the Government will talk about social media and the money they are putting in to tackling violent crime. I know they have recognised the amazing work that my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones)
have done on knife crime and a public health approach. However, we also want a preventive approach, as we have to work on healthcare. A legal duty to a public health model will mean little if there are no organisations to work with it and do the preventive work.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green talked about people who are in a desert of decent people. We in Walthamstow are a decent community: I know that not only because of the good families here with us, but because of the amazing people from the voluntary and community sectors who have come today. They, too, are committed to solving this crisis. Organisations such as Spark2Life, Access Aspiration, The Soul Project, Gangs Unite, Boxing4Life, Words 4 Weapons, the Waltham Forest community hub, Break Tha Cycle, Worth Unlimited, the Ken Tuit Football Foundation and Walthamstow Youth Circus all see that those young people need our support. They need a Government who join the dots and recognise that too many of our young people are struggling in education, are vulnerable to exploitation and are therefore vulnerable to such challenges.

Yes, I have seen the letters from the Minister, for which I thank her. We keep talking about exclusions and are therefore vulnerable to such challenges. We must ensure that young people receive alternative provision, that referral units are not seen as some sort of sin bin; and that we see those young people as worthy of fighting for. Please, Minister, I do not want some sort of sin bin; and that we see those young people quickly. W e keep talking about exclusions and are therefore vulnerable to such challenges.

Those causes are manifold. In London, we live in a city of enormous wealth. In fact, the wealthiest 10% of its population own half of the wealth. The disparity in income and wealth distribution in London is very stark indeed. All of our communities, including in my constituency, have examples of shiny new developments that have received enormous amounts of investment, but precious little is reinvested in the surrounding local communities.

Too often, that investment is done to the community rather than with it. That leads to people feeling that they are not part of the enormous growth in the wealth of our city, but that they are excluded from it. More importantly, they feel that they do not have the same—or, indeed, any—opportunities to engage in and enjoy the distribution and benefits of the wealth that they see all around them. That feeds into people’s lack of aspiration and determination to improve their life prospects through, for example, education. That despair and lack of aspiration feed into sections of our community. Not everyone is affected by this, but those who are are the ones that create the roots of the problems. Often, the communities are too quick to associate with one gang or another. Communities to divert young people away from crime. That sort of policing has been lost. Too many of the organisations that were involved in arresting people and investigating crime, but embedded in their local communities and involved in a great deal of diversionary activities that got young people away from crime. It was the policy of those safer neighbourhoods teams not only to know their communities but to own them and make them safe for the whole community, including young people who were vulnerable to becoming involved in gangs. Those teams knew the prominent individuals who were likely to be involved in crime, and they would engage with other agencies in their local communities to divert young people away from crime.

When others are in control and people feel safe in their communities, young people in particular do not feel that the only way for them to move safely around the community is to be associated with one gang or another. Too often, the postcode approach to gangs influences young people. We have lost the community engagement, which had local community policing—one of the range of agencies mentioned by other hon. Members—at its heart.

A safer neighbourhoods team in my constituency has, sadly, been decimated and now has only two officers. I went with them to play football in the pouring rain with a gang of kids on an estate. I very much supported what the officers were doing, but I asked the police sergeant, “This is not mainstream policing—why are you doing this?” He said, “Because it’s very important that these young people see the police in a different light from when they are being stopped and searched. It’s important that they feel that we are a part of the community that they can trust and come forward to; otherwise these young people will feel vulnerable and will be more likely to fall prey to those who want them to become involved in criminal activity.”

That sort of policing has been lost. Too many of the cuts to local authorities have fallen on services that, alongside the safer neighbourhoods teams, support young people. We have to address those issues. I commend the Mayor for trying to protect the number of safer neighbourhoods teams back—sadly, we are down to two dedicated ward officers per ward in my area, where we used to have six—because that is the right approach. I am sure that that will have...
an impact on crime in my borough. If there is one message that I would like the Minister to take from this debate, it is this: we need to return to that effective form of community policing that works with other agencies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) spoke about school pupils and exclusions. I absolutely agree that, too often, young people being excluded from school begins a downward spiral of neglect by services that should provide them with support, because they are overwhelmed with demand. Too often, young people who would otherwise be in school are left to their own devices in the community for too many hours.

We must also look at the other side: what is going on in schools and what are we asking teachers to do beyond educating young people? We have to look at why those young people had to be removed from school in the first place, and question whether it is right to ask teachers—including, quite often, women—in classes to deal with extremely violent situations. When violence takes over in a school—I have seen examples of this—young people see that teachers, and perhaps even the police, are unable to deal with the situation, and that it is the troublemakers or those involved in gangs who are in control. That makes them more inclined to become involved in such activity because it makes them feel safer at school, on their way home or when they are out and about in the local community. It is not just a question of children becoming vulnerable because they are excluded; we must address a lot more of what goes on in our schools. We cannot just leave it to the schools.

In conclusion, I say to the Minister that we must start reinvesting in our community policing, because it works. We must also provide organisations in our communities, such as schools, with the support they need to assist young people so that they are not dragged into gangs and criminal activities.

2.41 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. Like others, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) on securing this incredibly important debate.

We seem to be living through a knife crime crisis. In the year ending March 2018, there were nearly 40,000 offences involving a knife or sharp instrument—a staggering 16% rise on the previous year and the highest rate since comparable data began to be collected in the year ending March 2011. We should all be extremely concerned about that rise, especially because it has a disproportionate impact on young people and some of the most disadvantaged in society. Various solutions to the problems have been trialled over the years, but we do not seem to be keeping pace with what is happening. We cannot let the problem overtake us, because the consequences are all too real for our communities.

Other Members have talked about what has happened in their constituencies: in mine, at the beginning of November a 15-year-old child, Jay Hughes, was stabbed to death in Bellingham. Less than 24 hours later, a 23-year-old Ayodeji Habeeb Azeez was murdered in broad daylight on a Sunday afternoon in Anerley. That was just one year on from the murder of teenager Michael Jonas just outside the police station in Penge shut some time ago, and our constituents have expressed to me their fear about their family’s safety, taking their children to school and letting them be out at the local shops and on the streets.

Despite the difficult and tragic events that we have faced in Lewisham West and Penge, our community has shown strength and determination to bring the community closer. Stewart Fleming Primary School has held coffee mornings with the community, police and councillors, bringing them together to talk about how to tackle this problem locally. This Saturday, Athelney Primary School in the heart of Bellingham will hold an event with the police to bring the community together to talk about how to combat knife crime. I am proud of the resilience that our communities have shown in the face of adversity. As much as our community has worked hard to heal the wounds left by those tragedies, it cannot be left continually to pick up the pieces. The serious violence strategy sets out the Government’s response to violent crime and the increase in knife crime. There is extensive analysis in there, but my worry is that there are not sufficient concrete measures or funding for prevention.

We must be clear about the impact of austerity on the situation. Young people’s services play a key role in keeping people out of knife crime, but they have been cut to the bone. The budget for young people’s services has been cut by 60% since 2011-12, which led to the closure of youth clubs across the country. The Government’s own research shows that when there are no positive activities for young people to participate in, a vacuum is created into which gangs all too often move. We need investment in youth services and youth clubs in our communities.

Our schools play a huge role in the choices that young people make, but they too face massive financial pressures. When I visit primary schools in my constituency, I am told by school leaders that they can identify from the very early age of three years old which children are likely to be vulnerable to gangs and crime. They can identify them because they may have older siblings or family members who are involved in gangs. Schools in my constituency do a tremendous job working with those vulnerable people, but often there is a question about resources. Those schools are struggling to resource even the basics. When that happens, it is a real challenge to put time and resources into early intervention, yet it is so vital.

In London, the Met police have faced £1 billion cuts since 2010, which has led to the loss of 30% of police staff and 65% of police community support officers. Our police do an absolutely fantastic job. In particular, I pay tribute to Sergeant Dave Moss in Bellingham, and Sergeant John Biddle and PCSO Andrea in Perry Vale, who all do an amazing job in the communities. The reality in the wards I represent, however, is that we have at most two ward officers and one PCSO per ward; they do fantastic work, but they are overstretched. The big police station in Penge shut some time ago, and our small station in Penge was closed recently. That means that people do not think the police have as visible a presence as they used to have. Again, that means that people do not feel safe and do not feel as though they have the same relationship with the police.
Most people in the Chamber will agree that in order to tackle knife crime we need a public health approach. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who is not here as she is performing Whip duties. She chairs the Youth Violence Commission and has campaigned tirelessly for a public health approach to youth violence. What has happened in Glasgow is a testament to how a public health approach can work to reduce knife and violent crime. That approach requires joining up health, education, youth services, the Home Office and the justice system, but the reality is that they have all been cut in recent years. If we are clear about the public health approach, it must be properly funded in order for it to work.

The warm words we have heard about a public health approach to tackling knife crime are a step in the right direction, but they are not enough. The Government need to come forward and take the lead on this issue. The austerity agenda since 2010 has left our communities and young people behind. We really need a fully funded cross-departmental public health approach to knife crime. My community cannot wait any longer.

2.50 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure and a privilege to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Buck—particularly about a subject on which you have done so much good work. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) for securing the debate and opening it so eruditely.

Sadly, we have got used to seeing horrific murders, particularly of young people, that make headlines for a day or two before being replaced by other news or another tragedy. I hope we never become inured to that and never stop regarding each one as a terrible disaster, not just for the families concerned but for our communities.

Last year, there were 139 murders in London, more than half as a result of stabbings. Equally tragically, that is the tip of the iceberg, below which there is a huge volume of crime, some of which is not reported in the same way. This is not just a London problem; over the past three years in England and Wales, there have been increases of first 22% and then 16% in offences involving knives or sharp instruments, which numbered 40,147 in 2017-18.

Looking at hospital admissions, the number of “finished consultant episodes” due to contact with a knife, sword or dagger more than doubled in three years, to 12,412 in 2017-18. The Royal London Hospital has done very good work on this subject. Its statistics show that 25% of knife crime victims were of school age, the average age of victims was 18, and it was common for victims to have between five and nine stab wounds. The number of stab wounds treated in its unit has doubled since 2012.

It has become commonplace for people to carry a knife, for whatever reason or excuse that is given, yet doing so dramatically increases someone’s risk of injury; it is not a way of avoiding injury. About half of the stab victims seen at that hospital were injured by knives they took to the scene themselves; they either suffered self-inflicted wounds or had the knife taken off them and used against them. Those figures are staggering.

However, in the short time I have, I would like to look at some of the positives and possibilities. As colleagues have said, a lot of work is going on. Office for National Statistics figures published today show that in London—not in the rest of the country, sadly—the increase in violent crime and violent crime with injury has slowed. That is perhaps only the beginning of a turnaround in the problem, but it is worth noting.

I do not say it is not possible that serious knife crime will decline. Moped crime, which is often associated with violence, robbery and so on, and acid attacks have spiked but then declined in the past two or three years. It is possible that that will happen with knife crime, too, but I do not think the underlying problem will go away, because of the figures I have just cited. There will continue to be a climate of violence, which will manifest itself in one way or another. That is why the long-term approach that the Mayor of London and others have talked about is the right way forward.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I very much agree with what my hon. Friend is saying. Does he agree that in looking at the supply of knives, we need to consider the ready availability of some pretty horrendous weapons online? The Government need to look hard at what they can do to restrict access to knives through that channel.

Andy Slaughter: I do not disagree—some pretty horrific things are available, and they tend to make the headlines—but the most common weapons are kitchen knives, because they are so readily available. I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend about people getting around the rules online, but to be honest, carving knives, cleavers and so on are available in most kitchens. We need to think about that.

The Mayor is taking forward a number of other initiatives—other Members have spoken about them and I do not want to take up too much time—to support victims, work with communities and educate young people. I hope we all support them, and obviously we hope they are all successful, but this is a very complicated issue. YouTube and certain types of music were mentioned. The most serious recent incident in my constituency, which got a lot of national publicity because 40 people were arrested, was a horrific gang attack in which someone was pursued and stabbed on a public
street on new year’s eve. Fortunately, using CCTV, the alleged perpetrators were tracked to a party and everyone at the party was arrested.

It transpired that the party venue was an Airbnb let. I am going to see Airbnb to talk about that. It tells me that it will ban that particular user and give advice to the host, but we need to go further and ensure that we do not create areas of lawlessness in the city where such things can be done. There are many steps that can be taken to control the problem, which would otherwise become out of control.

The good news is that we have a lot of sound advice and help. I have been corresponding with and meeting a retired circuit judge, Nic Madge, and with the chair of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland, John Crichton, who did a lot of work in Scotland, which has pioneered work on this. I have also talked to trauma surgeons about it. It is a combination of detection, policing—of course—and looking at the social background, but also taking practical steps.

One issue is why there are these weapons lying around in every household, to go back to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). Why do we need to have such a number—often a large number—of very dangerous weapons in any kitchen? Why are they pointed? Why do people need 10-inch pointed knives? Why is it not possible to sell knives that have rounded tips? Most serious injuries are caused by multiple stabbing. These are ideas that could be better explored and taken up.

The expertise is there, but there are not sufficient resources. The Mayor of London is doing everything he can; he is squeezing every possible budget dry and increasing his precept, which I think is the right thing to do in this case, to fund the campaign against knife crime. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) said, there have been large cuts, with £850 million in cuts. I think, to the Met budget and another £263 million to come. Cuts of that order cannot be made without impacting on the ability to tackle these offences. I compare it to homelessness—another issue that is hugely affecting London and other big cities. We have huge expertise in how to deal with that, and we have dealt with street homelessness quite successfully before. What we do not have at the moment is the resources to do that.

I say to the Minister that I am sure we will have a consensus today and that everybody here is sincere in wanting to see this scourge tackled, but it is going to take substantial resources. I hope we can hear something from the Government today about where those resources might be located and where they might be allocated.

From November 2017 to today, there have been seven gang-related murders and three other murders in Hackney. I choose those dates because, prior to that, there was a two-year period when there had not been a gang-related death. Since October last year, there have been eight stabbings, including, most recently, that a 50-year-old man on the streets of Hackney last night.

We can quote the statistics as much as we want, but this is all about real human lives. Too many of us have had to visit families whose lives have been devastated and who will never live the same life again because of the loss of a child—their child, an actual child in their household. I have chosen not to name my constituents today; they have to live through enough pain as it is, and I am aware that there may be media scrutiny of what we say today.

I will quote from one constituent, who I spoke to recently, whose son was stabbed eight times in an ambush in Hackney on 7 November last year. After she visited him in hospital, she said:

“When he started to speak to me I felt physically sick and wanted to vomit. I told him I was feeling sick and he said it’s okay, I’ve been sick so many times since arriving here, just sit down... He told me he was ambushed and knives were coming at him from all angles. I thought that was it, he said. I didn’t even know these guys. They just ambushed me and started stabbing me.”

Her son underwent surgery to his legs, chest and arms, and both his hands will need plastic surgery, but she said:

“I’m blessed that I am a mother who can say thank God my son is alive.”

Despite that horror, that young man is alive today, but with life-changing injuries after such an horrific event. His mother went on to say:

“I have serious concerns and really don’t know where to turn for support and advice.”

I address the Minister when I say that this woman speaks for so many, whether it is youth workers, teachers, families or friends of those young people. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said, where do they turn to tell someone about what is going on?

After we had the riots in Hackney—a slightly separate issue from what we are discussing today—there were a good number of community events, where people talked about what had happened. I do not want to go down that route too far, but what was apparent was that people in communities know who the vulnerable children in their midst are. They know that, but they are not sure where to take that information or who can help. They are sometimes fearful of the intervention of authorities, who can come in and do things to people. We all know of case conferences where a vulnerable young person has eight or 10 adults in a room all talking about them, but not necessarily talking with them.

In Hackney, we live with the problem—sadly, all too often. The Hackney Integrated Gangs Unit works on a regular basis with 150 gang nominals at any time. A number of the factors now affecting Hackney are also affecting other boroughs, including gang youngsters getting involved, sometimes because the older perpetrators are in prison. That underlines the point about early intervention that many colleagues have talked about. Many children as young as nine and 10 are getting involved; we need to get early intervention in place, and I will ask the Minister about that later.
County lines grooming has been working. There is a danger that we conflate knife crime with county lines and gangs. It is not necessarily all related, but it is like a Venn diagram, with an obvious overlap. To illustrate the effects on very young people in my constituency, I spoke to a youth worker who told me about a young boy who was about 10 years old who had been given a gun to look after by some older men. The gun went missing, and he was told he owed them £3,000. Clearly, he could not find that, and he was going around asking anybody he knew if they could lend him the money. I do not know what happened to him, but that is one of the ways that gangs groom young people.

These young people need support and intervention; policing is one way to do that. It is worth highlighting that, in Hackney, we have lost one in four police officers since 2010. We are now linked with Tower Hamlets as one borough command unit, and we have not lost any more police, but there has not been any increase, so the savings have not materialised as additional people on the street.

In my intervention on the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), I mentioned that neighbourhood policing is vital. I remember the days when there was such distrust for the police in Hackney; neighbourhood policing helped to break down those barriers because people knew who they could talk to, or they could make a call to somebody anonymously. I have been on doorsteps on a number of occasions doing a roving surgery, and people have said, “I have to tell you something, but don’t tell the police. I don’t want them to know my address, because I have a teenage child, and I’m frightened that if the police come to the door, they will be targeted.” It is palpable fear.

On one side we see that fear, and on the other we see an increase in brazen behaviour. Only last June I went to a small community event. If I had arrived five minutes earlier, I would have been in the midst of teenagers arriving on bikes, pulling out machetes when they recognised someone and marauding through a group of toddlers and mothers, with only a couple of men in the environment. That did not make the headlines, because those people were not living their lives on Twitter or social media; they were just frightened in the moment.

As I arrived, someone was on the phone telling the police. For the next nearly two hours that I was there, not a police officer turned up. Obviously, I have raised this with the police, and I will not go into the detail—they said they were seeking the perpetrator. But what message does it send to our communities when we do not have enough police to go and get the evidence? People were willing to be witnesses, and between them they could probably have identified the perpetrators. What the young children there go away with is that something like that happens and the police cannot even attend. I have heard a number of tales of young people on bikes, with machetes in hand, brazenly going down the street to show that they are in control, because they no longer believe that the police will turn up.

In defence of the police, when they do come, I have seen instances where they know the young people. The remaining neighbourhood police work hard to know the young people, and they try to work with them to protect them. They know what is going on, and there is some good, talented policing going on, but there are just not enough police to do it well. The more police are removed into police stations and blue-light cars, the more the connection with the community is broken, and that is not working. The Minister has to directly address the release of resources. No one can pretend—if they ever did—that it is not going to make a difference to the lives of young people on our streets and the lives of families and communities.

The context, as others have said, is an £850 million round of cuts to the Metropolitan police since 2010. More than 17% of the funding is controlled by the Government, so it is directly in the Minister’s remit to tell us what she and the Government are going to do. The Public Accounts Committee, which I have the privilege of chairing, has highlighted real concerns about funding for policing and also about the Home Office’s understanding of exactly what the pressures are on the police—the cost shunting, for example. The police are the blue-light provider of first and last resort. They pick up the pieces when other public services, such as mental health and so on, are overstretched. So the police are doing more with less, and that has a direct impact in the circle of austerity. “Austerity” is a buzzword—sometimes, it is a positive word in the mouths of some Government Ministers—but it is having a real effect. The problem needs to be explained in those terms. We also have the context of cuts to local authorities of around a third—40% in my own borough since 2010.

I am really weary of this. Hackney is weary, the parents in my constituency are weary, and the young people are weary and afraid. We keep raising our concern—of course, I have been a Member of this place for nearly 14 years and in elected office for 25. Children are fearful. At an age when they should feel free and be able to roam their streets freely, they are afraid to go out. Their parents worry about what is happening to them when they are out, and are worried that they will not come home. I have met too many parents whose children did not come home, so I understand their worries.

Too often, I meet the parents and families of victims who will never walk through their door again. I meet parents who are burying or nursing their children. I meet teachers in schools mourning a pupil. It is not normal to go to a school’s speech day and have to talk about a child’s death. That happens too often to those of us who are not victims and are not really affected. It is the pupils and young people who are affected. We have all been to too many funerals, as churches mourn one of their own.

At every primary school I visit, the children raise concerns about knife crime and violence in very specific terms. I try to reassure them that what they read in the papers is a small percentage overall, but the fear escalates and reaches every one of them. I visited a youth group in Hoxton where young girls told me about their big fear of knife crime. The UK Youth Parliament’s English group has made knife crime its No. 1 campaign priority. We should listen—and the Minister should listen—to these young people, who tell us what is important to them, and that should be the most important thing to us.

I want to touch on the issue of social media, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham raised in her speech. I have been appalled by what I have seen, and I applaud the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and others who have raised such concerns. I was horrified to learn from a
local headteacher that a close associate of a young man currently in prison for the brutal manslaughter of a 16-year-old girl has a following of more than 1 million on YouTube. The videos blatantly talk about violence and gang action on Hackney’s streets.

It is not only YouTube that streams this stuff. BBC 1Xtra—our own public service broadcaster—broadcast a video of raps about stabbing on Hackney’s streets, which I raised with the BBC. In the video, areas are named and rival Hackney gangs called out. I was told that the production team did a careful analysis of the content and that, in this case, they did not think it crossed the threshold. Do they live in cloud cuckoo land? They certainly know nothing about my borough. It was immediately obvious to me, and I am a middle-aged woman, for goodness’ sake—it is not like I’m down there with the kids. I could tell that this was not just innocent stuff. I would not invest my money if I thought it was.

Margaret Hodge, who as you know is a Labour MP; I lived there for a little while—and when a councilomat left the Labour party and became an independent, I had to go and get her to come back. I recently spent some time in hospital—not on a visit as an MP, I lived there for a little while—and when a member of raps about stabbing on Hackney’s streets, which I raised with the BBC. In the video, areas are named and rival Hackney gangs called out. I was told that the production team did a careful analysis of the content and that, in this case, they did not think it crossed the threshold. Do they live in cloud cuckoo land? They certainly know nothing about my borough. It was immediately obvious to me, and I am a middle-aged woman, for goodness’ sake—it is not like I’m down there with the kids. I could tell that this was not just innocent stuff. I would not invest my money if I thought it was.

The Mayor of London joined us in Hackney during one of our worst periods of attacks. We met local community leaders, including very good young youth leaders, as well as church leaders, other key people and young people themselves to discuss what we need to do. As I said, we know what is needed. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, it is not rocket science. In fact, a very long time ago, under a Labour Government—I am not being party political—we began to look at some of the issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) was the Minister at the time, in a position similar to that of the Minister now, and he looked at trying to get that public health issue resolved. As the right hon. Gentleman said, it can be very difficult to get some of that health information into the mix, but it is vital that we do. That was one of the big stopping points. It is important that we have not just an initiative here and an initiative there, but the long-term approach that many have talked about.

Investment in youth work, particularly detached youth work, is one part of that. Since the Mayor of London visited, one of his deputies has visited, and it was really interesting to hear the young people themselves say what mattered to them and what worked for them. The young men and women could see that the diversionary opportunities for nine and 10-year-olds—they named that age group—were particularly important so that they knew they had a positive future that did not take them down the gang route and that took them away from the idea that they needed to carry a knife. It still will not take away the fear, but it gives them a positive outcome.

Going back to the riots in Hackney in 2011, not a single Hackney schoolchild was involved. Our schools are now among the best in the country—some of them in the top 1%. That is probably an enviable position for the Minister, given that her constituency in Lincolnshire is not in the same favourable position. Those young people had purpose and did not get involved.

The Home Office has said it wants to adopt the public health approach, but we need investment in prevention. We need something much more concrete than an aspiration. I am hopeful that the Minister, who is a thoughtful woman, will lay that out today. We know some of the triggers. As others have said, domestic violence or some kind of traumatic incident in childhood has a big impact on the future of young people, often leading to exclusions from school. If young people have a special educational need, it is often not dealt with quickly enough. The fact that they cannot reach an educational psychologist sometimes forces a school to exclude, when we would normally encourage it to keep a child in school. Delay means things escalate and can lead to expulsion and exclusion, so that young people do not get what they need.

There is a whole area of work around what happens in our pupil referral units and the support there for young people, but we do not have time to go into that today. It is good to have a Youth Violence Commission, but we want to make sure that its work is implemented. Early help and prevention is really important, but it has got to be more than just a pithy term. We need to invest early and make sure that those who might become younger in the gang are supported so that most of them do not become younger, but stay as children with hopes, aspirations and the freedom to roam.

Will the Minister put Government money behind this? It is not necessarily a lot of money. It is about how we configure the money that we have got. More money is always welcome. I am not asking her to say, “No, we cannot give more money”—I know that is probably the line she has been told to take by her officials. I understand that she personally cannot sign the cheque, but I am sure she will be lobbying the Chancellor. The Public Accounts Committee has highlighted how the Home Office has too little understanding of the pressures on the police and of the impact of funding, but I know the Minister or her colleagues will reply to our report on that.

What conversations is the Minister having with the Department for Education about special educational needs and other support for vulnerable pupils, such as teaching them resilience, providing mental health support and picking up, as schools often do, a problem at home that can cause other problems? Not all these young people have problems at home, but there is an overlap. What is the Home Office doing to take account of the Youth Violence Commission’s recommendations?

A small amount of money—for example, for an added youth work hour or two, or an extra half a youth worker—can make a huge difference. I am so impressed by the youth organisations that I visit in my constituency. They do amazing work, giving young people somewhere to go and sometimes walking a young person home because they are frightened to go home alone. When I have spoken to young people, very often they want something simple: somewhere warm, safe and dry to do their homework. They are not asking for a big deal. It can make a disproportionate difference in prevention and can increase the feeling of safety so that young people are free to roam.

I want to pay a brief tribute to the hospitals in my area—the Homerton and the Royal London—and the investment in making sure there is diversionary support. I recently spent some time in hospital—not on a visit as an MP; I lived there for a little while—and when a...
victim of a knife crime came in, I could see the very good impact of the support that wraps round in the Royal London Hospital. However, it is a tragedy that both the Homerton and the Royal London are centres of excellence in dealing with stabbings of young people—they should not be centres of excellence on this. Is that not a tragedy? However, they do good work and should be commended. Every young person who goes in with a knife injury should be properly “wrapped around” and supported. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) has highlighted that from her perspective as both an MP and an accident and emergency doctor.

I hope that the Minister will heed what the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said about the need for an ongoing process. We have started before, but the process stops and starts again. In the end, a long-term, ingrained approach will be better for everyone, including the taxpayer. I hope that the Minister will be the one who really kicks things off. She knows that if she does, she will have our strong support. If she does not, we will be snapping at her heels to make sure we do not have to visit more families who have lost a loved one.

3.20 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate, but I have to acknowledge that after 19 years in this place I am weary, depressed and upset. Here we are again: colleagues—often the same ones—coming to use our words in debates such as this. Hansard will record the issues we explore, and the tremendous number of ideas conveyed.

When I began my career in this place, Operation Trident was just getting going in London. At that stage the discussion was about whether we could get over the gun violence then happening in London, associated with gangs often described as Yardie gangs. There was a sense that we would be able to get on top of the problem, and that it would go—that the issue was really to be associated with downtown America. Almost two decades later, we might view the situation we have got to with knife and gun crime and gang activity in the UK—in London and England, overwhelmingly—as if it were a patient, being assessed by a doctor. The patient’s condition could be getting worse, stable or improving. Sadly, it has clearly got a lot worse. Something has gone drastically wrong.

I agree with everything said in the debate so far, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), who secured the debate. I send love, humility and respect to the family of Jaden, aged just 14, who lost his life recently. When I think of him, I cannot but think of my eldest son, who is just a year younger. It breaks your heart. I also reflect on the loss, on Easter Monday last year, of a beautiful young woman, Tanesha Melbourne-Blake, who was shot and killed leaving a newsagent in Tottenham. That led to the current debate, which is currently overwhelming us.

Things have got worse. We have heard that there were 40,147 offences in the year ending in March 2018. Today we found out that violent crime has gone up by 19%. Homicide and knife crime are up. It is all up. The problem is, in a sense, not new: we just have to read Dickens’s description of Fagin and the gangs that populated London in 1839. However, it is a problem that grips us hugely at this time.

An important issue has been touched on, in relation to county lines, and that is drug use. What we are talking about is not just kids knifing each other because they happen to be violent. Behind much of the knife crime lies a huge industry, which reaches all over the world. It begins in countries such as Colombia. I have spoken to quite a lot of young urban people aged 12, 13 and 14 and many of them cannot even tell me where Colombia is. They certainly could not organise the trans-shipment of cocaine across the Atlantic and through Spain and Amsterdam to this country. They are not the men in suits—often anonymous—who deal with that traffic. Those men are not sufficiently made the subject of debate in this House. Yes, such organised crime traffics huge amounts of drugs. However, it also traffics people—women—and guns, which is why there is an increase in gun crime.

There are many different types of young people in the urban communities affected by the problems we are debating, but I will give Members a picture of some of them. Of course, there is the young man or woman who has fallen into a gang. We talk about them a lot; but there is also the young man or woman growing up on one of the great housing estates. They are not in a gang. They do not know anything about gangs, really. They are just seriously scared.

I think about those young people a lot, because that was me once—scarred. They are picking up knives and burying them in bushes, because they do not feel safe in the communities where they live. I must tell the House that if they do not feel safe in the communities where they live it is the responsibility of this place, of the Met Commissioner, of Government—the Home Secretary—and of the Mayor. We have failed those young people living on estates who do not feel safe and who pick up knives and bury them before and after school and at the weekends, to protect themselves—and then find themselves using them.

There is another group of young people. I care a lot about them. They are the kind who might be in a park after school, following the crowd. Often they have special needs such as dyslexia, ADHD, mild Asperger’s or autism. They are just following the crowd, in the park, and impressionable—like most teenagers—and some of them are in jail as I speak. Why? It is because the police are not close to the intelligence, and there is a culture of “no snitching” and not telling tales. Therefore we round them all up. To put it bluntly, because we are mainly talking about black lives, no one really cares.

There are different groups of young people, and then, of course, there are the victims. All of that is largely driven by drugs, which are prolific. The price of cocaine has dropped, the purity has risen, and it is estimated that 875,000 people used cocaine in England and Wales last year, a rise of 15%—it just gets worse—with an 8% rise among 16 to 24-year-olds and 432 deaths related to it.

All that is driving the gang activity, serving markets across the country. That struck me when I was in Highbury Corner youth court. I had a young constituent, 17 years old, and the magistrate announced that he had...
been arrested in Aberdeen. I have been to all four corners of this country, but I must admit I have never been to Aberdeen. I thought, “What’s he doing in Aberdeen?” It turns out there is a big cocaine market in Aberdeen. There is a lot of money coming off the oil rigs, and there was my young constituent, serving the market in Aberdeen—or rather being pimped out by an adult to serve that market.

Of course, the trafficking of that drug drives a culture of violence back home. It can affect kids who are not county lines, because it creates a culture of violence in the communities we represent. I must ask the Minister: in that context, why, oh why has the Home Office budget for the UK Border Force been cut by £110 million, or 18%, since 2012? We talk a lot about cuts, but if we cut the Border Force it will have an impact on the drug market.

Most sane commentators, who in this country stretch from William Hague, the former leader of the Conservative party, to Charlie Falconer, the former Secretary of State for Justice under the previous Labour Government, are beginning to talk very seriously about the idea that the war on drugs has failed, yet we in this place have failed to keep up in our responses. That is for another debate, but let us put that squarely at the centre of this discussion. Sadly, just as was the case when Dickens was writing about London all that time ago, where there is poverty, where there is hardship—I will return to that in a moment—there will always be young souls who can be taken up. Much can be said about prevention, but let us address the seriousness of the demand driving this whole agenda and the need to support the different kinds of young people I discussed.

Many in this debate have talked about the importance of policing, but there are other crucial services beyond policing. We require our local authorities and young offending teams to set effective violence reduction and youth strategies, but it is hard to be effective when council budgets have been slashed by 54%. Youth centres, after-school activities—gone. Between 2012 and 2016, 600 youth centres closed, 3,500 youth workers lost their jobs and 140,000 places vanished. Spending on universal youth services has fallen by 52%. Interventions at local level have disappeared. That is on top of the neighbourhood policing that we have discussed.

Let us be clear about what that neighbourhood policing is really about; my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) made this point. We have housing estates where, I am afraid, the police cannot be found. That is why the young people are scared. The police are just not there in the numbers they need to be. I think of the Broadwater Farm estate in my constituency, which has 3,500 people. The police are not there in the numbers, and that is why the young people are scared.

When those young people are making a decision about whether to tell on a young person they know who has a knife or a gun hidden in his bedroom—“Do I worry about him and his mates on the estate or do I tell the police?”—they are making a reasonable judgment. Of course, they do not tell the police, because they do not think the police can protect them; they do not see them in the numbers and the police are not present on the estate. It is not an unreasonable judgment that these young people are making.

I must also make it absolutely clear what is happening in reality in these young people’s lives and those of their parents. This is not to make excuses: poverty is never an excuse for violence. I grew up poor and working-class. Many Members of this House, including some who have spoken already, grew up in those circumstances. I never, ever say that poverty and being working-class or poorer is an excuse for violence. Nevertheless, black youth unemployment in this country between the ages of 16 and 24 is currently running at 26%. The national average is 12%—it is more than twice that for this community. People say, “Oh, why is it always black youth that we see?” but my mother would have said, “Idles hands make the devil’s work.” It is quite simple. I am sure you too have heard that saying before, Sir Graham.

Young people must have jobs, and we must do something about the housing crisis, which is also creating polarised communities: people living perpetually in houses of multiple occupation, again in the context of the housing estates I am describing, with a lack of services, polarisation and increasing poverty, against a backdrop of huge cuts to welfare—they, too, have a bearing on this—and unemployment. The cauldron in which the story we are telling is mixed starts to feel akin to what Dickens was writing about. That is the point.

Yes, we need a public health approach, but it will have to be more than just a nice slogan or phrase; I am worried that it is becoming one of those in politics. I have seen it happen before. It happened with another phrase that we started using a few years ago: “affordable housing”. Affordable housing? In London? At 80% of market value? We still use that phrase, but it means nothing to ordinary people, and I am worried that the public health strategy, which had a great name when it came out of Glasgow, is being tarnished, because it needs resource, joined-up activity and real co-ordination.

I am very pleased that I was asked to be on the violence reduction task force, but there is a hell of a lot to do. On the issue of drill music and YouTube, some of the commercial companies have a lot to answer for at the moment, but we should not focus entirely on the music that young people listen to. There are issues across social media with all young people in Britain, including young girls bullied on forums such as WhatsApp and Instagram.

Lyn Brown: I am not sure whether my right hon. Friend was here for my speech, but the only thing I would like taken down is the specific drill video that celebrated the murder of a 14-year-old in the playground, not all drill music. I do not intend to blame a genre of music for the deaths of children.

Mr Lammy: Let me put it on the record that my hon. Friend is entirely right; if my comments came out the wrong way, they were not what I meant. However, there are issues about what it is acceptable to put on social media—what it says and what it is driving—and there is a real question about regulation. That is absolutely clear.

France has just banned smartphones for under-14s in school. I think. We have heard nothing from the chief medical officer in this country—nothing. Nothing has been said. But we know that there are issues of mental health. We know that self-harm is up and anorexia is up. In a way, knife crime is a different sort of self-harm
in the community, is it not? So there are some ingredients here, but we need to be careful about focusing on one particular group when actually this is an issue across the board.

I hope that the Minister might say something about serious organised crime and about cocaine—about drugs. I hope that she understands that the thrust of much of what has been said here is entirely about the resources available for the police, local authorities, youth services and families themselves to grip and deal with this problem so that we are seeing a reduction and not—as we are seeing now, month on month and year on year—a rise.

3.40 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham, and, as always, to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). I often seem to follow him in knife crime debates, which is always daunting.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) for introducing it. I agree with, I think, everyone in this Chamber; there is a lot of agreement about what the problems are, what issues we face, and what should be done. I know that the Minister is listening and that she will do all she can.

I want to remember the young men who have died in my constituency of Croydon Central. Andre Aderemi died in August 2016. Jermaine Goupall, who was only 15, died in August 2017. And Kelva Smith, whom I had canvassed during the election campaign and promised that I would work on knife crime and do all the things that we needed to do—I let him down; we all let him down—was stabbed to death on the streets of Croydon in March 2018.

Fortunately, there have not been any murders of that kind in Croydon since. We are very glad about that and hope that it is the start of a trend. I want to pay tribute to my borough of Croydon, which, in the face of very significant cuts, is doing a lot. There are community groups. There are faith groups, which we should not forget, because faith groups have people who can love one another; have money; have buildings that they can sometimes support other community groups in; and have faith, which is what drives those people who are religious and gives them a purpose. We must not forget the faith groups, because they have a huge role to play. We also have the council and the police. They are all working together. Croydon Council has committed to setting up a violence reduction unit, which is a very good thing.

The main flip that I think we need to see at national, regional and local level is that, rather than panicking every time knife crime rises and throwing a pot of money at the problem, we need to understand the problem and its causes, work out how much money that would cost to address and then implement the measures necessary. What happens, probably across all our constituencies, is that as soon as there is a pot of money, many different organisations have to compete with one another to get it. It leads to a situation in which we are encouraging people to work on their own, rather than working together. We need to flip that round.

In Croydon, we have done a review of the 60 serious cases of youth violence. That has not been published yet, but we have seen some of the findings. In the 60 serious cases of youth violence, every single child was outside mainstream education. There was a maternal absence. That was interesting because we often talk about paternal absence, but there was also a maternal absence. It was not necessarily that the mother was not there, but she may have had an addiction, may have been working several jobs or may have had her own mental health problems such that she was not able to parent.

The other interesting finding was that, of the 60, very few had a trusted adult—whether that be a teacher, someone from a state organisation or a family member—in their life. When we look at the number of times, especially as seen in the serious case reviews for most violent deaths, that the state intervenes, for none of the people to be able to be a trusted adult because they come and go and different state bodies intervene is significant. That intervention does not quite have the impact that we want it to have.

I really hope that Croydon, by setting up the violence reduction unit, will look at all these things in the round—look at adverse childhood experiences, look at the trauma-informed approach and look at what is actually going on in the streets of Croydon. We have done a bit of work looking at where violence happens in public in Croydon, and there are about 11 hotspots in the borough; there are only about 11 places where most of the violence occurs. If there are only 11 hotspots, surely we can have more policing in those areas and try to tackle some of those problems for the long term.

Like other colleagues, I pay tribute to the schools. There is a huge difference, which we have talked about, in approaches to these issues. In Croydon, there is one school that in a year made 187 temporary or permanent exclusions. There are others that make a handful, if any. Those approaches are very different. We have had many conversations about why this is happening—why exclusions are increasing, and what we need to do about it.

It is a slightly easy response to blame entirely the new academy system, as some people do. Because of the autonomy that academies have, perhaps we are not able to put enough pressure on them, and they are looking to their results. That may be true up to a point, but there are also some excellent academies that are not excluding children, so we need to understand what is really going on in that mix.

The all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, which I chair, did some work on this, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) mentioned. We found that one third of local authorities do not have any places left in their pupil referral units. That is not surprising, given that permanent exclusions have increased by 56% in the past three years. Almost half those exclusions are of children with special needs. It cannot be right that we are permanently excluding children with special needs without going through a whole series of interventions that should be in place to try to keep them in mainstream schools. That will not always be possible. It is not always right for children to be in mainstream schools, and we do need to have a PRU system that works, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) said,
we need to look at the whole PRU world, because not enough light is being shone on the good and the bad, and how effective they are.

Knife offences have increased at pretty much the same—

Lyn Brown: Can I just make a tiny intervention on the point that my hon. Friend has just made? One issue with the PRU in my constituency is that mums have complained that the people they are trying to get their children away from, the groomers, are waiting outside the PRU because the captive audience is going to leave it and walk straight into their arms.

Sarah Jones: That is absolutely true. There is a greater vulnerability to influence. There are lots of issues with PRU systems. For example, children tend to finish much earlier than in mainstream schools; they finish at 2 o’clock, so they are more likely to be on the streets for longer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) has mentioned before in Parliament, if we look at when knife offences occur, we see that there is a peak after school and before parents come home from work. It is absolutely tragic, but the number goes up, and then it goes down again. It would be good to keep children busy for that time, before their parents get home from work.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. In pressing the point about PRUs and alternative provision, will she also recognise—I am sure that she sees this in Croydon—the very real concerns about the disproportionality in the number of black and minority ethnic children who are excluded from schools and find themselves in alternative provision, and, frankly, the seeming scarcity of public concern about that escalation in school exclusion rates?

Sarah Jones: My right hon. Friend is absolutely, completely right. I have had cases in my constituency, as we probably all have, and I have talked before in the Chamber about the worst case that I had.

A young boy who was black was permanently excluded from school. He was on the route to being diagnosed as autistic, which takes a very long time. Everybody knew that he was autistic. His classroom was turned around over the half-term period, so when he came back to it everything was different. He kind of freaked out: he was violent and was permanently excluded. This child was five—five years old. We appealed the case and won, but for obvious reasons his parents did not really want him to stay in that school, so we found alternative provision. His mother is a wonderful woman, who has the wherewithal to be able to fight the system—get in touch with her MP, and do all the things that people need to do. I just feel for the people whom I do not meet; they are the ones who do not have that wherewithal, so they suffer much more.

We absolutely need to look at education. The Government are looking at the issue. Ofsted is looking at it, too, and the Children’s Commissioner has done great work. We really need to work out how some schools manage to keep these kids and not exclude them, while still running a good school without disruption to the other children in their classes.

I will talk a little about the public health approach. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead said that there is no magic bullet for these issues, and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said that of course we know what the solutions are, and we just need to follow what works. I think both those things are true, and we need to be clear about that.

We actually know a lot about what works. Violence is not inevitable; how we reduce violence is absolutely evidence-based. The public health model is a way of reducing violence. When we talk to surgeons such as Duncan Bew from King’s College Hospital, he will say that he is a great advocate for the public health approach. He spends his time putting back together children who have been stabbed. Actually, we should also recognise that there would be a lot more dead young people were it not for surgeons’ improvement in their practices over the years. The survival rates for stabbings have gone up massively and it is a credit to our medical profession that they have managed to do that.

Duncan Bew, this great surgeon who is an advocate for the public health approach, would say that if he, as a doctor, knew that there was a cure for a disease but he did not implement it, then he would be done for medical negligence. Why on earth, then, are we not doing what we absolutely know works—looking at violence as an epidemic? That is what it is. It goes up then it goes down, and it spreads and then contracts. Reducing it is all about interventions. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said—completely rightly—we have to keep doing things, because we can do all the right things and reduce the violence, but then it will go up again.

The public health approach is very simply about interrupting the violence, preventing its future spread and changing social norms so that it does not happen again. It is very clear. The World Health Organisation has done plenty of work on this issue as well; it will give people the seven strategies of intervention, which work. We just need to look at the evidence of that work, and as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham said, there needs to be more than words. We need to make sure that we actually put the funding in underneath, to ensure that we make all the interventions that we know work.

On county lines, I agree with everything that has been said already. Croydon has a line to Exeter and I have met Exeter police. They say that if they go to the coach station in Exeter and see a little chap getting off the coach with no baggage, that is someone they need to be looking out for. However, one of the issues they have highlighted to me is how we make sure that those young people, when they are picked up by the police, are looked after; sometimes the police will ring the council and the council say, “Well, the foster parent doesn’t want them any more, because they have just been found with drugs. We haven’t got any emergency foster care. Can you just keep them there for a bit?” The police end up with these kids sitting in their office for hours on end while the council tries to find someone to look after them.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend highlights a really important issue. One of the other challenges, of course, is that if a child is outside their own local area, they fall between different social services authorities. They are picked up
as an emergency case, if they are young enough, by the receiving area, but ultimately they are not that area’s responsibility. I am sure she will agree that that issue also needs to be looked at.

Sarah Jones: Absolutely—I completely agree. Joining up all these services, so that we look after these children properly, is incredibly important.

Youth services have already been mentioned, as have policing and the strong case for more resourcing for neighbourhood policing. When we met a group of young people who had been in prison for knife crimes, some of whom had been in and out of prison over a number of years, they talked about knowing their local community police in the past. They said that that was not the case now.

Finally, I will talk about sentencing—we have not talked about that much—and about what we do with our young people. The all-party parliamentary group went up to Polmont in Scotland last year. Scotland has stopped imposing custodial sentences of less than a year for young people, so it has halved its youth prison population, but it has kept the funding in place for the prison in Polmont. Scotland now has half the number of young people in prison that it had before; those young people who are in prison are there for serious crimes. They are the people with the significant issues.

In Polmont, the funding goes into teaching young people to read and write, giving them apprenticeships and giving them all kinds of skills. The fire brigade comes in and does a course with a load of them on public safety. Local businesses teach them how to do bricklaying or other skills that we actually need outside prison. We met a lot of those young people, who are managing to turn their lives around.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham talked about the fact that a lot of the people involved in knife crime in London are black. Of course, in Polmont the entire population is white, but when we asked people there, “What are the issues that cause knife crime in Scotland?”, they will say, “Sectarianism”—a word that we do not use in London at all. Sectarianism is the issue in Scotland.

It is worth looking at the underlying issues, one of which is that a lot of those young people in that prison for youth offenders, two-thirds come from the 20% most deprived areas. The same poverty underlies all this violence. Furthermore, nearly 40% of them had lived in a family where there was domestic violence, and 75% had experienced a traumatic bereavement. Traumatic bereavements are really significant. A lot of those young people had experienced one, two or three traumatic bereavements—somebody in their family had been murdered, or had died of a drug overdose or in some kind of other accident. Some 50% of them had parents who had been in prison. The issues there are exactly the same as in London.

I want to ask the Minister some questions, although I know that she will probably not have time to answer all of them today. I am interested to know how the Government are engaging with young people on this issue, because, as has been mentioned, young people are at the heart of what we need to do. They are the answer to all these problems. It would also be good if she talked about what more we can do about school exclusions, and how we can share good practice on that issue.

There was a recent report in The Independent that the Home Office is reducing the support available to county lines victims. I do not know whether the Minister can comment on that. Also, does she have any understanding of the proportion of children involved in knife crime, or in any kind of serious violence, as a result of grooming and criminal exploitation? My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham talked about that.

The figures from the Office for National Statistics that came out today showed that knife crime is up by 8%—the highest level on record. We absolutely need to tackle that rise and to be far more ambitious about doing so. I end by saying that our ambition should be nothing less than to be the safest country in the world. That is what we should aim for. To achieve that, we need to increase policing but we also need to look at the underlying causes of violence. As Desmond Tutu famously said,

“There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”

That is the answer.

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): We now have three Front-Bench speakers to wind up, but I know that the hon. Gentleman who secured the debate would also like to wind up briefly at the end for a couple of minutes.

John Cryer: If we have time.

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): If we have time.

3.59 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham, and to summarise the debate and speak on behalf of the Scottish National party.

I thank the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) for securing this very important debate. He took time to stress the importance of an approach that addresses prevention as well as cure. He also asked that we address the causes of crime and, in doing so, adopt a joined-up approach.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) asked what could be done to monitor social media, which can be used to promote violent crime. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) highlighted the extended trauma felt within communities and the fear it spreads. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) noted that violent crimes are sometimes associated with tit-for-tat crime among criminal gangs, and mentioned the role that our media play in that. He also mentioned the violence reduction unit in Scotland, which I will talk about in greater detail later.

The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) rightly talked about the victims and their families, and highlighted an increase in violent organised crime and the young people who are, and will be, put at risk until we address this problem. The hon. Member for Etham (Clive Efford) talked about the need to invest in communities in a way that benefits them—“working with” rather than “doing to”. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) expressed frustration that we are not keeping pace with the changing nature of the
problem, and also referred to the VRU in Glasgow. The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) spoke movingly about a young man who survived a terrible attack but whose mother now does not know where to turn. Where is the support for those victims? The alternative is young men and women being recruited into gangs, so we need intervention and support.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said that he was weary, depressed and upset that we are still debating violent crime all these years after he came to this place, and that the statistics in England and Wales are getting worse. Like many others, he mentioned policing and county lines, which is surely a subject on which a debate is waiting to be had. Finally, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) asked the Minister to listen to the consensus of opinion that she has heard today. The hon. Lady also paid tribute to faith groups, which play an important part in our community, and I am glad that she found time to mention the excellent work that has been done in Polmont. From that brief summary we can feel the frustration and anger at the loss of life and the perversion of aspirations, especially among our young people.

A United Nations report published in 2005 found that Scotland was the most violent country in the developed world, with more than 2,000 people subject to violent attacks every week. In the same year, another report produced by the World Health Organisation determined that Scotland had the second highest murder rate in western Europe. Glasgow was widely claimed to be the murder capital of Europe, as was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, with more than 70 knife-related murders every year.

Looking back on those statistics, one of the most eye-catching aspects was the rapid increase in crime over a relatively short period. Between 2003 and 2004, for example, the number of murders rose by almost 20% and the number of attempted murders rose by one third. An arms race was taking place on our streets as individuals sought to protect themselves from perceived threats. Drugs, alcohol and gang culture played a key role in that rapid rise in knife crime, and many urban areas of Scotland were affected.

That experience was not felt exclusively by Glaswegians. My constituency of Inverclyde also suffered—or, to be more specific, families suffered from the loss of loved ones as we tried to grapple with violence on our streets. Scotland stood at a crossroads, and it was at that point that the Strathclyde police established the violence reduction unit, in an effort to change the circumstances that were giving Glasgow such a brutal reputation. There are similarities with London’s well-publicised problems with knife crime, which are spreading throughout the United Kingdom, in part due to county lines. Perhaps the rest of the United Kingdom is now standing at a crossroads as to how it tackles that problem.

Scotland’s choice was to take a public health approach to knife crime. While custodial sentences for handling offensive weapons tripled in length between 2005 and 2015, a number of other programmes were launched to engage directly with young people. For instance, a pilot scheme called No Knives, Better Lives was first implemented in my constituency of Inverclyde. That scheme was primarily an education programme and included workshops that allowed young people to speak with ex-offenders, victims and medical professionals as they learned about the consequences of carrying a knife. That programme was backed up by high-profile advertising campaigns in cinemas, bus stops and other public locations. By 2010, there had been a 35% drop in knife carrying, and since 2006-07, there has been a 68% decrease in violent crime in Inverclyde.

The VRU has been supported by the work of Medics Against Violence, a group of medical professionals from a range of disciplines who go out and speak with schoolchildren about their experiences with knife crime. It is one thing for a child to get a lecture from their family, or indeed from a politician; it is entirely another thing for them to hear an ambulance driver describe their experience of finding a murder victim, or a plastic surgeon describe the process of reconstructing a person’s face after a knife attack. However, the primary focus of the campaign was not shock and gore: it was the real-life stories that had the greatest impact on the students. Dr Christine Goodall, an oral surgeon, said in 2009:

“We realised that, in order to have some chance of preventing young people getting involved in violence, we had to address the problem early—it was no good waiting till we saw them in hospital after an injury. We realised we should be talking to young people before they accepted that violence was an inevitable part of their lives... We thought perhaps if we could take the doctors out of the clinics and operating theatres and into schools to talk about the consequences of violence from their point of view, we might have some chance of helping some young people avoid injury.”

Another community initiative established by the VRU was the “call in”, which called in more than 600 gang members in Glasgow. Those who attended listened to hard truths from former gang members and the families of murder victims. One attendee, named Paul, said:

“I felt excluded all my life. Now here was the police, who used to exclude me all the time and they were trying to include me.”

Among the 200 gang members who became directly involved in that initiative, violent offending halved and weapons possession dropped by 85%. Violence decreased even among those who did not attend the programme. More generally, the work of the VRU has contributed to the halving of Scotland’s homicide rate. Similarly, the number of recorded incidents of handling an offensive weapon declined by almost 70% between 2006 and 2016. The number of recorded violent crimes has also halved since 2006-07 to one of the lowest levels since 1974.

All of those achievements have been made possible by the more than £17 million in funding provided by the Scottish Government, including £1.6 million to the VRU’s community initiative to reduce violence—which tackles territorial gang culture in Glasgow—and £776,000 to the mentors in violence protection schools programme to continue its work of educating our young people about the impact of violence. That policy is a statement that the Scottish Government will not allow knife crime to be normalised.

Duncan Bew, the clinical lead for trauma and emergency surgery at King’s College London, who was cited earlier by the hon. Member for Croydon Central, stated:

“The VRU is run by the police force, with support from the Scottish government. This is highly unusual—Scotland has the world’s only police force to have formally adopted a public health model.”

I know that London can learn from our experience, and I am pleased to read that the city recently established a VRU. I wish its director, Lib Peck, all the best in her new role, and in spreading the message that violence is not inevitable.
In the words of a tireless knife crime campaigner from my constituency, John Muir MBE:

“We have to be honest about what is going on out there.”

We have clearly had some success in Scotland, but we cannot become complacent. Knife crime still exists, violence is still on our streets, and even one death from knife crime can devastate a community. I sincerely hope that the UK Government can learn the lessons of prevention and are taking a proactive approach, engaging with those at risk of going down the road of violence.

4.9 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) on securing this important debate. It has been an excellent debate that has allowed us a lot more space than we usually have in the main Chamber to debate the root causes of the issues and practical solutions. What has been striking has been the consensus around both the causes and the solutions.

My hon. Friend spoke about the profound shift in society and how the structures that used to provide the safety net for young people have been undermined or even disappeared. The hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) talked about the creation of similar gaps through which vulnerable children are falling because of the failure, particularly of local authorities, to provide services thanks to nine years of cuts. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) talked about the self-same perfect storm of cuts that have created vacuums allowing criminal gangs to exploit very vulnerable children. We heard about the trauma not only for victims and their families, but for entire communities such as West Ham, Walthamstow and Lewisham West and Penge, where people feel afraid to go out to use the shops and attend school, despite the clear resilience of those communities.

The debate has made clear the consensus on finding a public health solution and a whole-system, long-term, trauma-informed approach that targets intervention and has prevention as its absolute focus, providing intervention as early as possible alongside targeted, permanent community policing. It is clear that that kind of joined-up approach simply is not happening at the moment. At Home Office questions, I raised with the Minister the need for mental health referrals for victims of crime. I had a young constituent—who was 17 years old—who was stabbed multiple times last August. He was then targeted by the same gang and stabbed again in September. He is still to receive a child and adolescent mental health services referral. He is without mental health support six months on, after being stabbed multiple times on two separate occasions. That simply is not good enough and shows the failure we are experiencing in the system.

For everyone scarred by this now five-year upward trend of violence, it augurs a personal crisis from which they will never truly recover, with young lives lost, families destroyed and a son or a daughter they will never see again. It is a national crisis. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) was right about that. I served as a special constable 10 years ago in Brixton, which is a high-crime neighbourhood. In my three years, I never experienced a shift like the one he described. Our police are facing demand that they have never seen before. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) said, that is because they are acting as a blue-light service of first and last resort. They are picking up the crises in all our other public services, including mental health and social care. They are having to transport patients with physical illnesses and ailments because the ambulance cannot arrive. She described a case where the police did not turn up for two hours after a machete attack. My jaw dropped. It is thoroughly unacceptable.

Meg Hillier: If I may correct my hon. Friend, the police did not turn up at all to that community, on that day or thereafter.

Louise Haigh: It was even worse than I said. It is completely unacceptable. As my hon. Friend said, the police do their best when they arrive, but they are so stretched for resources that they are simply unable to provide the service that the public need and deserve.

It is important to set the context for the contagion of youth violence we are seeing. As has been said, today’s crime statistics confirm once again that we are facing a crisis. I am sorry to say that it has been allowed to build as a result of neglect by the Government. Never since records began has violent crime been as high as it is today. Never since records began has knife crime been as high as it is today. The number of arrests has halved in a decade. As statistics today have shown, not only are we seeing a surge in violent crime, but police numbers remain at levels not seen for 30 years. We know that hampers the ability to tackle violent crime, and it does so in two important ways.

First, the fall in police numbers inevitably forces the police to focus their resources on reactive policing and responding to emergencies and crimes once they have happened. That is why we saw so many neighbourhood policing teams merged with response teams, masking the true number of officers lost from our streets. It is thoroughly ineffective, because the policing matrix shows that almost two thirds of successful interventions designed to reduce crime are proactive, rather than reactive.

Secondly, and even more crucially, evidence has shown time and again that local policing increases the legitimacy of police, which encourages the local community to provide intelligence and report crimes. It is beyond doubt that the reduced legitimacy of the police as a result of cuts has led to under-reporting, especially in certain categories of high-volume crime. That legitimacy and support from communities suffering from this epidemic is crucial to any success. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham talked about the need for young people in particular to see the police in a different light, as fellow human beings and members of the same community.

Intelligence-led stop and search will always be a crucial tool in bearing down on knife crime, but the truth is that that tool can only hope to be successful alongside a proper neighbourhood policing function rooted firmly in the community. Policing matters—of course it does—but serious youth violence does not happen in a vacuum: it reflects the environment and the society in which individuals live, learn and work throughout youth and adulthood and the political choices made about who to support. The story of youth violence is at
heart a question of vulnerability and is fundamentally a result of twin failures: first, an environment that fails to nurture children; and secondly, services creaking under terrible strain and unable to provide the specialist support that children in particular desperately need. That is the scandal at the heart of this violence, and it is the real price of austerity. We have talked about exclusions, which my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) spoke passionately about. Just 2% of the general population have been excluded from school, compared with 50% of the prison population.

The Children's Commissioner has shown that 70,000 under 25-year-olds are currently feared to be part of gang networks. Some 2 million children live in families with complex needs, and 1.6 million have no recognised form of additional support. As the Children's Commissioner said in her excellent report on vulnerabilities:

“We are all familiar with frailty in old age but much less so for children and teenagers...do we know...about children who start school unable to speak? Do we understand how this affects their...progression? Do we realise that an inability to express yourself leads to anger, and difficult behaviour, which is then reflected in rising school exclusions...? Do we know that if this continues...not only does the child’s education suffer but so does their mental health? Do we know that 60% of children who end up in the youth justice estate have a communication problem...? No—we do not know how many children get speech and language therapy last year, or how many were turned down.”

Why do we not know that, Minister? Why are we using evidence dating back to 2002 on the link between school exclusions and violence? Why has nationwide research not been conducted since 2006 on why young people carry knives and use them on each other? The last research was prior to the rise of social media and the consequences of austerity. Why are our services not designed to prevent children with special educational needs or speech and language difficulties ending up in the criminal justice system? Why do hospital-based diversions only exist in a handful of hospitals across the country, while serious youth violence is prevalent in every city? Why have our known successful youth services been denigrated to the point that most young people do not have access to any diversionary activities at all? I hope the Minister will consider carefully the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead for a full inquiry, so that we can consider all the factors in why young people are carrying knives.

The Government’s language on public health has been welcome, but while it is easy to talk, it is much more difficult to take the action necessary to tackle this contagion. That is the task before the Minister and we will all continue to hold her and this Government to account. Despite the challenges posed by Brexit, there is no more pressing or significant a challenge facing the House than the one we have been discussing today.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Uptminster (Julia Lopez), and the hon. Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Leyton and Wanstead, that we should listen to young people’s voices. I completely agree with them. That is an important part of my role. Indeed, last year, as well as going to visit youth services and people who work with young people in their communities, I invited former gang members into the House of Commons to meet colleagues, so that they could describe their experiences to us in this place of power and influence that sets the laws that have such an impact on their lives.

I am also sympathetic to colleagues’ urgings regarding adverse childhood experiences. This week we launched the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which, as I said at the time of the launch, is important for not only the immediate victims of domestic abuse, but the children who witness incidents of violence in their homes. We know that the most prevalent factor for children in contact with social services is experience of domestic abuse. Those children are more likely than those not in contact with social services to require alternative education provision. Again, we have heard from hon. Members about the impact that that can have.

One woman I spoke to last week at a women’s centre told me how her teenage son had started to copy the behaviour that he had witnessed at home before she could escape her incredibly toxic relationship. The gang members whom we meet and talk to through youth workers provide a reminder that domestic abuse is a horribly common factor for those who are drawn into gangs as well.

I pay tribute to the police and all agencies that work to stop violence, and that have to deal with the aftermath of violent incidents. I know that those thanks are very much echoed across the House. I want to give the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead a chance to wind up, so I will try to stop in about six minutes.

The Government published the serious violence strategy last year. I know that hon. Members are very familiar with that document, which sets out a step change in the way we think about and tackle serious violence. One of the most important parts of the strategy is the serious violence taskforce. I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) are both part of the taskforce.
It is an important way of drawing together all the agencies that have been mentioned, and placing an obligation on them to change some of their thinking.

The topic of exclusions has been raised frequently. A great deal of work is going on at the moment through the taskforce, and through the Department for Education, on exclusions. A report is due, I hope shortly, from Edward Timpson, looking at alternative provision across the country. The results of that review, as well as the work that we are conducting through the taskforce, will help to solve some of the problems that have emerged regarding children being vulnerable to gangs.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham spoke passionately about the role of drugs. He spoke with eloquence and clear feeling about how it has affected his constituents, and the young people in his constituency who are being used to ferry drugs around the country. Shockingly, the United Kingdom is, I think, the highest consumer of cocaine in Europe. I emphasise the message again that anyone taking those drugs—a wrap at the weekend, or whatever—needs to be very clear about the role that their wrap is playing in the wider market of drugs and gangs.

We are taking a range of specific actions—too many, I am afraid, to go through this afternoon. The Offensive Weapons Bill is making its way through Parliament to ensure that we tighten up on some of the problems that we know about regarding, for example, the online sale of knives. We have just announced 29 projects that will benefit from £17.5 million through our early intervention youth fund. Many of those are, I am happy to say, in constituencies of Members of Parliament here today.

We are supporting additional much smaller charities through the anti-knife-crime community fund. I am glad that one of the projects that we are supporting is Redthread, because we know from A&E wards, which sadly have to try to pick up the pieces after a violent incident, that there is a teachable moment for children who are brought into A&E wards. Through Redthread, in London, Nottingham and Birmingham, we can reach more children to stop them on the path that they are taking.

I recognise the role of robust law enforcement. I have been out on a raid with the Metropolitan police’s violent crime taskforce. I am really pleased that that is working well. Nationally, we have Operation Sceptre, where every single police force in the country has a week of action of tackling knife crime in a way that is appropriate for their local area.

I am also very much in agreement with colleagues who raised data-sharing. We put explicit comfort in the Data Protection Act 2018 that organisations can, and should, share data to safeguard vulnerable people. The more we can put that message out, and press, frankly, the Department of Health and Social Care and others to have confidence in that, the sooner we will see results.

Very often, A&E departments are where we can get a great deal of information about what is happening, and where, in our local communities.

The Home Secretary recently announced a new £200 million youth endowment fund to provide long-term support over the next decade to young people at risk of involvement in violence. That picks up on the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green: that we need a permanent focus on the problem. That approach is coupled with the fact that we will consult on imposing a new legal duty to support the multi-agency approach in tackling serious violence. Again, there is a focus on permanence and ensuring that we are working constantly to help these young people. There will also be a review of drugs misuse, given the importance of drugs as a driver of violence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster raised many points, including international crime. Other developed economies are facing similar issues with the rise in violent crime. We called police forces, law enforcement agencies and health agencies to London a couple of months ago to talk to us, and to discuss what we could do internationally to stop it as well.

Those are just some of the measures that we are taking. I am very conscious that I have not had time to answer more questions. I thank every colleague who has spoken. If there are particular issues that they would like to discuss with me outside the debate, I am happy to do so. However, I think there is one thing on which we agree: we all want this to stop. I believe that by working together, with the comprehensive approach that we have taken this afternoon, we can—and will—that happen.

4.28 pm

John Cryer: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I will be brief, because I do not have much choice. This has been a cracking debate; I wish I could refer more extensively to the speeches of hon. Members across the parties, but I will make just two points.

First, my friend and neighbour the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and many others spoke extensively about the public health approach to youth crime and youth violence, particularly knife violence. Crucial to that approach, as far as London is concerned, is the restoration of the safer neighbourhoods teams, which were introduced about 20 years ago. I was the Member for Hornchurch at the time—it was before I lost to the predecessor of the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez): not that I am bitter about it.

I remember the teams coming in and making a palpable difference almost straight away. There is intelligence that cannot be picked up when the police address crime purely by responding to incidents; it takes safer neighbourhoods teams out there, getting to know their wards. Every ward in London had a safer neighbourhoods team with a “one, two, three” system: one sergeant, two officers and three police community support officers.

Secondly, will the Minister consider my request for a full public inquiry into youth crime and its relationship to drugs, knife crime and violent crime generally? Perhaps she could discuss the matter with the Home Secretary and come back to me.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered tackling knife crime.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Even with that evidence published, there will always be some cases, and cases in young women can be very tragic. They can lead to the loss of a young life, and often leave children without their mother. Because the disease can be so devastating, in 2008 the then Labour Government introduced a programme of vaccination against the most virulent forms of HPV for all girls from the age of 12. In fact, for that first cohort, we vaccinated up to the age of 18 to catch up. Those who were 18 at the time will now be undergoing their first screening. If as expected the rate of cervical cancer in that age group drops, it will have been well worth while.

When the programme was introduced, I well remember MPs getting a lot of letters from parents saying they did not want their daughters vaccinated—it still happens—because they somehow saw it as encouraging promiscuity. That is not what vaccination is about. It is about vaccinating girls before they become sexually active. I hope parents will think about the risk they are putting their daughters through if they do not have the vaccinations.

Helen Jones: I will answer that point in a moment, because it is important that we look at the evidence. There will always be some cases, even among women under 25. We can never eliminate the risk completely. When that happens, it is important they get the right treatment. That is why in 2010 guidelines were published for GPs to ensure that young women who presented with abnormal symptoms were offered screening and referred on to a consultant if necessary. That does not always happen—I will come on to that in a moment.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I apologise that I cannot stay for the whole debate. What monitoring is done of GP practices providing that screening, including for women over the age of 25? I had a smear that presented as abnormal. I had HPV. I went to my local GP and asked for my smear test that I was required to have and was told that they did not do smear tests. What monitoring is being done to ensure that all GPs are adhering to the guidance and their duties under the legislation?

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very good point and I will be asking the Minister to look at that. Our first problem is getting people through the door. If there is something wrong with us, it is natural to think either that it will somehow go away or that it might be cancer—we kid ourselves that, if we do not get a diagnosis, it is somehow not happening. We need to have much more publicity to encourage young women to report to their GP if they have abnormal symptoms. After all, it might not be cancer and they might be reassured. Equally, if it is cancer, the sooner someone gets treated, the better their chances of survival. I do not think that that message is always getting through, particularly to younger women.
The other problem is that the rates of people attending screening, even among those who are eligible, are falling. In the last year for which I have figures, only 69.1% of eligible women attended their screening appointments. That is down from 73.7% in 2011. In practice, that means that 3.5 million women in this country have not been screened in the past three and a half years. That is very worrying. Even more worrying is the fact that 1.7 million have never had a test. Some 345,000 have very worrying. Even more worrying is the fact that means that 3.5 million women in this country have not had a test in the past 10 years. What is more, there are significant regional variations in the rates of screening. For instance, for those aged between 25 and 49, the rate of screening in London is 61.6%. In the north-east, it is 72.9%. Among over-50s, the rate in London is 74% and in the east midlands 78%. We need to look closely at those figures and find out why women do not attend. It is no use getting into the blame culture. We need to ask the right questions. Are they frightened, for example? Are appointments not at convenient times? Are there particular groups of women who do not turn up for screening? It is probably a mixture of all three.

I was sent some very interesting information from Jo’s Trust, who asked a group of young women in a survey why they did not attend for their screening. Seventy-one per cent. said they were frightened of the test and 75% said they felt vulnerable. A whopping 81% said they were embarrassed, which is a particular factor for young women who are constantly bombarded with air-brushed photos of what they should look like and what their bodies should be like, so they suffer from a lot of body consciousness. Despite the fact that doctors and nurses keep repeating, “We don’t care what you look like, we are not interested in what you are wearing, we do hundreds of these tests”, the message is not getting through. It is therefore important that tests are conducted in a supportive environment.

Interestingly, in the same survey, 67% of the women said they had felt they were not in control of the test and 68% said they would not discuss their fears with a doctor or a nurse. That particular problem applies to survivors of sexual assault: 72% are put off going for their screening or do not go at all. It is vital that women are screened in a supportive environment where they get through. It is therefore important that tests are conducted in a supportive environment.

Another issue needs tackling: when women under 25 present with abnormal symptoms such as abnormal vaginal bleeding, they are not always treated according to the guidelines. In fact, they are frequently not treated according to guidelines. There are plenty of examples of younger women going to their GP with symptoms and being told they are too young for cervical screening, and plenty of examples of women going time and again and, as one lady told me earlier, being fobbed off. The problem is that GPs do not see a lot of cases and cervical cancer is therefore not the first thing they think of. The Government must do more to alert GPs to the possibility of cancer to get early diagnosis and ensure that people are referred to consultants where necessary.

**Helen Jones:** I will give way one more time and then I must make some progress.

**Jim Shannon:** Constituents have expressed concerns to me on two issues: first, that it is very painful; and secondly that it is embarrassing. When it comes to giving peace of mind to ladies going for cervical cancer screening at whatever age, it is very important that the doctors and GPs are involved at an early stage to put their minds at rest. The importance of cervical cancer screening cannot be underlined enough, but the ladies need to be assured of not having the pain and embarrassment, which is a big task for the NHS.

**Helen Jones:** The hon. Gentleman is right. Women need to be assured that they will be treated sympathetically, whatever their age. All of us who have been to screening know that sometimes it is fine, but sometimes someone is a bit ham-fisted and it is not fine. It is better than getting cancer.

Another issue needs tackling: when women under 25 present with abnormal symptoms such as abnormal vaginal bleeding, they are not always treated according to the guidelines. In fact, they are frequently not treated according to guidelines. There are plenty of examples of younger women going to their GP with symptoms and being told they are too young for cervical screening, and plenty of examples of women going time and again and, as one lady told me earlier, being fobbed off. The problem is that GPs do not see a lot of cases and cervical cancer is therefore not the first thing they think of. The Government must do more to alert GPs to the possibility of cancer to get early diagnosis and ensure that people are referred to consultants where necessary.

**Emma Little Pengelly** (Belfast South) (DUP): I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that GPs and others must take the concerns of young people under 25 seriously. I recently attended a pensioners’ parliament in Northern Ireland and many women over 64 spoke of the difficulty of being taken seriously when they go to the doctor. The vast majority of deaths from cervical cancer happen
to those over 50 and many of those over 64. Is that not also an issue that needs to be addressed? Those women feel that they are being left behind.

Helen Jones: The hon. Lady makes a good point. We need people to realise that women know their own bodies and know if something is wrong, so people must listen to what they say. There are too many examples of women having to pay for a private test before finding out they have cervical cancer. If it is not diagnosed early, there is a chance it will become terminal. If it is diagnosed early, the chances of survival are much greater, so we need to ensure that people are diagnosed early.

On the question of whether the age for screening should be reduced, I am not convinced at the moment. The scientific evidence does not support it, but I hope that the Government will keep it under review. If the evidence changes, we need to change what we do. Sir Mike Richards is undertaking a review of cancer screening and is due to report by Easter. I hope he looks at the issue. Ministers must ensure that they get the best advice and they have to proceed on that advice. We have to remember that, rare as it is, in 2016, 15% of women diagnosed with cervical cancer were under 30, and last year, 12 of those who died were under 30. We can and should do much more to prevent such deaths by ensuring that women are screened where necessary, even if they are under 25. If they have indications that require them to be screened, they should be. We must ensure that we promote the HPV vaccination programme, which is one of the best things that has been done in recent years. I say to parents who worry about it, “Don’t put your daughters at risk. Get them vaccinated.” We have to do much more to convince them that vaccination is the right thing. We have to do much more to make screening accessible and easily available to women, and it must be done in a supportive environment. Let us be honest: it is a bit like a sausage machine when we go to the GP, precisely because health workers are screening all the time. To them it is not at all unusual, but it is to the people who attend; that is the difference.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I hope that, like me, the hon. Lady will support the Public Health England awareness campaign that is about to start, which will try to tackle all the misunderstandings about screenings, and to overcome the feelings of fear and embarrassment that she described so well.

Helen Jones: The hon. Gentleman is right, and it is not before time to have such an awareness campaign. However, it is no good having one unless we ensure that screening is easily available and that people are treated well when they go. That is vital, because one bad experience can put a woman off ever going again, which is not what any of us want.

Natasha started the petition because she wanted to raise awareness of the symptoms of cervical cancer, and to ensure that other women did not suffer as she had suffered. That was a remarkable thing to do, and I hope that today’s debate, which I know her MP, the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), would have liked to have attended—unfortunately, she has to be in Committee elsewhere—will go some way towards doing that. I hope the debate will open up the dialogue on how best to get women screened, and when they should be screened, and I hope that the Minister will commit to keeping the age of screening under review, so that, if the scientific evidence supports screening earlier, that is acted on.

4.51 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to follow the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) in this important debate. I thank the petitioners, as it is good to have the opportunity to discuss such an issue in open debate. I think that all Members will get the strong impression that there is agreement across the House for what is being proposed.

I will start with the Public Health England campaign, which I mentioned when intervening on the hon. Lady. I agree with her that it is about time we had such a campaign, and that it will have a hard job. On the one hand, it has to tackle issues concerning the women themselves—the enormous misunderstandings about the screening process, and the fear and embarrassment that surrounds it. There is not just fear about the illness; anything to do with cancer creates fear, so there is an enormous amount to overcome.

However, I suggest that the Public Health England campaign should also look at the other side. The Minister has heard us talk strongly today about the impact on GPs, and the way in which they have to handle the issue and make facilities available. It would be very good to have something in the campaign that targets GPs, making those points to ensure that testing happens in the right place, at the right time and in the most effective manner.

The hon. Lady also mentioned inoculation against HPV, which I support. I am pleased that we are now inoculating young boys against it as well, as that makes a very big difference. Those who have talked to medical professionals in this area will have heard stories about the number of people who develop cancer as a result of HPV. It is very good to have such inoculations, and to be able to support the campaign.

Like the hon. Lady, I am not yet convinced that the age for screening should be reduced. Around the world there has seemingly been a general trend to increase the starting age of such programmes. I think the American Cancer Society recommended that the age for cervical screening go up from 18 to 21, which is interesting. The reason she and I believe that the screening age should not be reduced is the false positives that are created. No one wants to be put in the situation of having a false positive test. It is not about the waste of money, but about the concern that a false positive creates for an individual. I am not yet convinced that the age should be brought down but, like the hon. Lady, I call on the Minister to look very carefully at it, to keep it always in mind, and to keep reviewing it.

I think that Scotland has increased the age at which women go for their first smear test from 20 to 25. That, too, is an interesting reflection of the way things are going, and builds upon the difficulties in dealing with this matter. However, I thank the hon. Lady for presenting the case, and the petitioners for bringing it, and allowing us to discuss it in the way we are doing.
4.56 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Sir Roger. I am hugely grateful to the friends and family of Natasha, and all those who signed the petition, for enabling us to have the debate, which is much needed.

HPV accounts for 99.7% of cervical cancers. It also accounts for cancers in boys. I would like the Minister to seriously consider rolling out the vaccine programme to boys as well. I cannot think of any other inoculation programme where we inoculate only half the population. It seems a bizarre approach to trying to eliminate a reasonably common form of cancer.

I will build on what my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing North (Helen Jones) said about the fears. As soon as I started tweeting about this matter, people replied saying how dangerous the vaccine was. I am sorry, but the evidence does not support that. It is an insurance policy for people’s children, and I urge parents to look at the evidence, rather than the scaremongering on Facebook and Twitter.

HPV is a sexually transmitted virus. As my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, unfortunately children start having sex, on average, at 15.6 years of age. Legally they can have sex from the age of 16. I am sorry, but to me it does not make sense to have a gap of nine years, knowingly, between when children are likely to become sexually active and be exposed to a sexually transmitted disease and when they have any screening.

When I started talking about this issue a couple of weeks ago, two of my friends came to me and said that their cervical cancer was picked up when they were 21. They were incredibly fortunate in one way: because they had a history of cancer in their family, they were on the programme for high-risk people, so it was picked up early. I am very concerned about the people who are not on that programme and for whom it does not get picked up. If two of my friends had this cancer at 21, I am sure that many others are at risk, and will have cancer that is not picked up until it is too late.

The smear tests are not fun and can be embarrassing, but at my GP they have changed. They now use a small brush that is nowhere near as uncomfortable. I say to the Minister that there are ways of minimising the discomfort of such tests. Turning to my personal experience, I have always gone for my smear tests. After one test, I received the letter we all dread, saying that there were some abnormalities and asking me to go back for a biopsy. When I did so, lo and behold, it was confirmed that I had cancerous cells.

I did not have any symptoms. If I had had the symptoms, I would probably have put them down to something else, because they are irregular bleeding, discomfort during sex and back pain—I am 49, so I suffer those quite a lot anyway. [Laughter.] Those are not abnormal symptoms at any age, even at a younger age—I looked to the women in the room. If I had had those symptoms, the last thought on my mind would have been, “Oh, my goodness; I might be at risk of cervical cancer. I must go and do something about it.”

I was lucky that it was picked up really early, so I had simple day surgery and did not require any further treatment. Two weeks ago I got the letter saying that I was six months clear, which is just wonderful. I want everyone to know that feeling, and that is why I am so grateful that the petition was put forward and there are campaigns, and why I am so concerned that the number of women going for smear tests is dropping.

The figure cited by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing North that 1.7 million women have never had a smear test chills me, but there are often very good reasons why women are not going. A lot of it, for the women I speak to, is due to past sexual violence or childhood trauma. I ask the Minister to look at the guidance that goes out to GPs. If a woman has never been for a test, or has missed a number of appointments, instead of assuming that she is being difficult or that she cannot be bothered, is it possible to put something in the chase-up letter that says, “We understand that this can be very difficult, so here is the nurse you can talk to, so we can minimise some of the trauma and the worry that going for a smear test might create”?

These are simple things that we can do and that can change lives. I am very supportive of lowering the age for smear tests, for the reasons I have outlined, but I also think that we owe it to young women to give them the protection they can possibly have.

5.1 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to speak in this debate. I was supposed to be with you and others at the Council of Europe last week, but I was not there; I was having a biopsy done, because I had had an irregular smear. It was an uncomfortable, painful experience, but it was largely made better by the fantastic doctors at St John’s Hospital in Livingston. I will get the results in three to four weeks—hopefully they will be all-clear.

It is very important that those of us who have a voice use it to speak out and encourage young women and people in the trans community to have their smear tests. I had a really fantastic conversation last summer with people from Jo’s Trust, who spoke passionately about the work they are doing with members of the trans community.

I want to pay tribute to some of the organisations that work in the area, including a charity in my constituency called the Michelle Henderson Cervical Cancer Trust. Michelle Henderson was in the year below me in high school; I did not know her well, but we occasionally attended the same house parties and I knew her to be an incredibly bright and vivacious young woman. In October 2010, at age 26, she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. She died on her 28th birthday in October 2012. Her father is the famous football player Willie Henderson. Michelle set up the charity not long after she was diagnosed, and Willie has continued her incredible work in her memory. A couple of years ago I did the 120 km last leg of the Camino de Santiago to raise money for that incredible charity.

Too many women are dying young. Many of us feel that we must listen to the health professionals; we absolutely must, but we must also consider the individual cases of those who, like me, had irregularities picked up early on, well below the age at which cervical smears are now being carried out in Scotland, England and the rest of the UK.
The hon. Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for Warrington North (Helen Jones) mentioned victims of sexual violence. I want to pay tribute to the work of My Body Back, a project set up in August 2014 by Pavan Amara that supports women who have experienced rape or sexual assault to take their bodies back again. It runs specialist services and recently opened a clinic in Glasgow that includes a cervical screening and maternity clinic. That work is so vital, because for women who have been victims of sexual violence it can be a harrowing experience to have to go and have a smear done. The fact that the design of speculums has not developed or changed in decades, if not longer, says something about the care that is given to women’s health.

I was diagnosed with HPV—for the rest of the world, let us remember that that presents itself as genital warts—in my late teens. I had intercourse with a man—I was not out at that point—and the condom broke. He was good enough to get in touch to tell me that he had contracted HPV, not from me but from a previous partner. That was an experience that I have lived with ever since. It has been a source of deep shame, because it means that no medical professional has ever been able to tell me whether my irregular smears—I have had many over the years—and much treatment for pre-cancerous cells—were directly related to that experience.

The positive part of the story is that a few years after my experience, and after I was given the all-clear, I was contacted by a big health conglomerate that was developing a vaccine to stop HPV and asked me to give my cells. I was happy to do that, so I spent a couple of years travelling back and forth to clinics, giving my cells and blood. My unfortunate experience—the experience of many women the length and breadth of the country, and not something we should be ashamed of—led to my cells being used to develop the vaccine that is now given to many women and young girls across the country. That is something I am very proud of.

I had not planned to speak about my personal experiences today, but I figure that those of us who have a voice should use it. Cervical smears are at an all-time low. There may be an element of complacency because we are wiping cervical cancer out, but—as my doctor reminded me ever since. It has been a source of deep shame, because that means that no medical professional has ever been able to tell me whether my irregular smears—I have had many over the years—and much treatment for pre-cancerous cells—were directly related to that experience.

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I had not planned to speak about my personal experiences today, but I figure that those of us who have a voice should use it. Cervical smears are at an all-time low. There may be an element of complacency because we are wiping cervical cancer out, but—as my doctor reminded me the other day as she was peering over me while doing my colposcopy—the vaccine protects against only three strains of HPV, which, like all viruses, has a habit of mutating. We must say to every person who should be getting their cervical smear how vital it is, and we must listen to them about their real and genuine concerns.

As the hon. Member for Warrington North said, the terrible shaming of women’s bodies in the media plays a part in why women and girls feel that they cannot come forward. We must remind them that our bodies come in all shapes and sizes, and they are all beautiful. The only way to prevent this terrible disease from killing more women is to make sure that we get out there, talk about it and encourage them to go for their cervical smears.

5.7 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, particularly under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. It is great to be in a Parliament in which women are prepared to stand up and share some of the most private, intimate things about their lives—probably things they have not told their mothers—in a forum such as this.

Hannah Bardell: I just want to say that, when I went to the sexual health clinic in Edinburgh, my mother came with me. She was the only person I trusted—and, yes, until today there were only a handful of people in my life who knew that story.

Jenny Chapman: She sounds fantastic—how lucky you are.

We are now in an age in which women can stand up in Parliament, as I do not think they could even as recently as 2010, when I was first elected, and talk about the cost of Tampax, smear tests, their sexual history—

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): And mesh.

Jenny Chapman: And mesh, as my hon. Friend never stops reminding me. That is a good thing—a wonderful thing—and I am really proud to be part of it.

When I saw that this debate was taking place, I asked for the data for Darlington, because I wanted to see where we stood. I was anticipating the same thing I normally get when I compare health data for the north-east with the rest of the country, but I was pleasantly surprised: take-up is better in the north-east than in most places in the UK, which is a very interesting fact. Part of it, I think, is about the stability of communities and the ability to access services that are themselves stable. They do not tend to move around too much and GPs tend to serve for longer. Although there can be many problems with access to services, it appears that, in this regard at least, women in my constituency are availing themselves of the opportunity to get tested at a higher rate than women in other parts of the country. That is very welcome.

Looking at the data on Darlington, I notice that the participation rate among 25 to 49-year-olds is fairly steady at about 74% or 75%. The take-up among older women—those aged between 50 and 64—has gone down by 2% in the last year, which seems to be the case in other parts of the country as well. I welcome the discussion about testing young women under the age of 25, but we should be mindful that we might be sending the message to older women that they do not need to worry. Take-up is perhaps dropping off more quickly among older women than among those in other age groups due to embarrassment, indignity and all of that. At the risk of oversharing, the only smear test I have ever had—where I really did not care happened not long after I gave birth to my second child. That was not an issue at that point. However, I am mindful of the fact that older women are not taking part in the way we would wish. Some of that is obviously about the indignity, but also there is a lot of misinformation and misconception about cervical cancer.

I have heard it said that once a person is no longer as sexually active as they might have been earlier in their life, or does not change partners quite so often, they are somehow at less of a risk or no longer need to be so concerned about cervical cancer, and their need for a test is therefore reduced. I have heard people say that, if they are in a same-sex relationship, they do not need to
have a cervical screening test. There seems to be an
association between sexual activity and a risk of cervical
cancer. I do not know where that has come from or why
it persists—my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington
North (Helen Jones) referred to it when she talked
about vaccination. That kind of misconception seems
to apply to older women as well. If the campaign
mentioned by the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell)
takes place, it is very important that they take the
opportunity to get those messages right, too.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah
Champion) made a very helpful point about women
who have been victims of sexual abuse. They have a very
special and entirely understandable concern that is not
taken into account by the blunt approach that service
providers can take. More thought needs to be given to
that. Disabled people might have additional needs when
accessing this test, and I am absolutely certain that not
every setting will be able to cater for those needs in a
way that enables a disabled woman to have the test with
the dignity and sensitivity that we would all expect.

The declining participation in smear tests is a trend
that should ring an alarm bell for Ministers, and I am
sure it does. This is a red-flag dataset. It is great that we
have the data—it is fantastic to debate something with
clear information, and when we can see good-quality
data over time and get a good idea of what is happening
in different parts of the country. We must use that to nip
this problem in the bud before it gets even worse. From
people I have spoken to, access to this service is one of
the principal reasons, along with all the other things
that we have talked about, why women are not participating
in increasing numbers and why we are seeing those
numbers decline.

The GP patients' survey last year found that 28% of
patients found it "not easy" to make an appointment
over the phone to see a nurse—up from just 19% in 2012.
We have had many debates in this place on the
difficulty in accessing GP services, which I know the
Government will want to grapple with. It is affecting
these women. A smear test is a very easy thing to want
to put off. Someone might get round to making that
phone call, but if it does not quite work the first time, it
is tempting not to get round to it again for some weeks
or probably months.

The work that Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust has done is
absolutely phenomenal—what a tremendous organisation.
It is really impressive. Its data, stories and the way it
puts those across in a manner that everybody can access
and understand are fantastic. The trust found that one
in eight women find it difficult or impossible to book an
appointment for their smear test, which just cannot be
right. It might be the case that women should be encouraged
to access services not through a GP, but through a
specialist clinic where they could access contraceptive
services at the same time. That is now available in
Darlington—it is also open in the evenings and is a very
good service, which might be one of the reasons
participation rates in my constituency are holding up
relative to other areas of the country.

Obviously I take the point that the age of screening
must relate to science, but I wonder whether this is a
situation in which we might be able to prevent some of the
misconceptions and anxieties about pain, which
does not need to happen, or a lack of dignity, which
there does not need to be if screening is done sensitively.
Young women can have a good experience if they are
equipped to have a test at an early age. Perhaps we
need to give some thought to positive early experiences
of smear tests to increase participation rates among
women over 25.

We need to consider an awful lot about access to the
test and cervical cancer generally. This is an important
part of it and I congratulate everybody who signed the
petition and put it in front of us. We have an opportunity
to do something that would make the lives of my
constituents and everybody else's so much better and
safer. The Minister is listening and thinking hard, and I
know he wants to do right by the people who signed the
petition.

5.17 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a
great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger,
and to take part in a debate in which there have been so
many thoughtful and personal contributions. I congratulate
my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North
(Helen Jones) on her detailed opening. I tried for some
time to secure a debate on this subject, in order to raise
the concerns of my constituents and others who were
denied smear tests because they were under 25 and so
did not receive a diagnosis of cervical cancer. My hon.
Friend raised the case of a young lady who died of
cervical cancer around Christmas. She believed that had
she been allowed a smear test earlier, the cancer might
have been caught at an early age.

My understanding of the campaign under way at the
moment is that it does not necessarily aim to extend
access to smear tests to all women under the age of 18;
it argues, more simply, that a smear test should be
carried out when a doctor believes it is necessary. I
know of the case of a young woman, Lucy, who lives in
a constituency neighbouring mine. She had a history of
cervical cancer and so was given a smear test, but the
lab did not even test the sample and destroyed it because
she was under 25. She went on to develop cervical
cancer—it was detected when she went for a private
smear test. I am happy to report that it was eventually
cured, but not without the difficulties of treatment.

My constituent Sophie wrote:

"I'm 23. I have two children (aged 5 and 16 months).
When I was 17, I fell pregnant with my first son and my
midwife asked for a smear test a few months after I gave
birth, as I was suffering from abnormal pains in my
pelvis area. My sister had been diagnosed with cervical
cancer around Christmas. She believed that had
she been allowed a smear test earlier, the cancer might
have been caught at an early age."

So there is a family history. Sophie went on to say:

"I wasn't given one, due to my age. Three years ago, I
was suffering from pain again and they refused a smear, again due to
my age, but used a cotton wool bud for a swab. This came back
with abnormal cells and I was given antibiotics to clear these up
and take the pain away. The doctor advised me if it carried on I
would develop cervical cancer and may not be able to have further
children. However, he did not refer me for a smear.

I had my daughter in June 2017 and still suffer from strange
pains and, again, my midwife asked my doctor to refer me, but my
age has always been a massive problem. I'm 23. I have two kids.
I'm a law student, and it's always in the back of my mind that, due
to my previous abnormal cells, which they didn't look further
into, and my family's history, I could potentially have cancerous
cells I don't know about, which would completely ruin and
change my babies' lives."

[Jenny Chapman]
Sir Roger. I thank everybody who signed the petition (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, have access to cervical smears if they are needed. Objections and discriminatory in age.”

Sophie concluded: “I totally back you, Chris, with this, and hope that this legislation is changed. It’s totally against women’s human rights and discriminatory in age.”

The proposal is that women under the age of 25 should have access to cervical smears if they are needed. Objections to the proposal suggest that smear tests that are done too early might be inconsistent and inaccurate, and throw up false positives, as other hon. Members have mentioned. The campaign is not about testing all young women by extending the testing programme to 18 to 24-year-olds; it is about allowing a test only when the circumstances require it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North talked about the current regulations, which she believes are not being implemented. The regulations behind the 25-year age limit are now 13 years old, and they have not been reviewed in that time—my hon. Friend asked the Minister that they be reviewed. The Smear on Demand campaign has prepared an extensive research paper that shows that the initial figures used 13 years ago to justify the 25-year age limit may have been incorrect, as they related only to when patients were diagnosed with stage 1B onward, as opposed to stage 1A. Many of the high-profile cases that we have heard about today were initially diagnosed with stage 1A. The campaign looked at figures for women under 28. The number of women diagnosed with stage 1A is highest in those aged 25—the figures start only at 25 and are not collected before then.

The smear test is supposed to be a preventative measure, but women can access it only at 25. It makes no sense to remove the possibility of prevention for the lower age limit. I do not think that it is in dispute that 25 is a good age at which to start routine smears, but when a doctor believes that a woman under that age needs a smear test, it should surely be allowed on the NHS. The campaign is not asking for all women under 25 to be tested; only those for whom that is recommended by a doctor. Some 99.7% of cervical cancers are treatable, because cervical cancer goes through three stages of pre-cancer, which means that it can be very slow growing. Currently, a smear test is the only cancer-detection test available that can detect pre-cancers.

I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to prevention in the NHS strategy that he recently presented to the House. I also welcome his commitment, which he gave to me in the main Chamber, to asking Mike Richards to look into the issue. I have not yet heard from Sir Mike, but I am sure that he will soon be in touch following the Secretary of State’s commitment. The House is currently dealing with some very difficult, intractable and divisive issues. This is not one of them. It is an easy issue for which the Minister can perhaps change the regulations and direct that if a doctor believes that a young woman under the age of 25 has symptoms that require investigation, they are investigated. That is a minor change that could have major consequences. In these difficult times, I urge the Minister to apply some common sense and grab that chance with both hands.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank everybody who signed the petition and all the women who have come to listen to the debate. I know that getting down to London can be quite tricky—I say that because I come from Hull—so I thank them all for coming.

I agree that having a smear test is not pleasant, but I think that we would all agree that it is crucial. While we are in a sharing mood, I will share a little bit with you all as well. I too had abnormal smear tests and was found to have pre-cancerous cells when I was in my early 20s. I had just finished university and decided to move to Leeds to spend time with my sister. It was fine, because I had had the biopsy and—they had to remove the cells—went through the various bits and pieces of the operation. Since then I have been on a yearly recall, so I have had so many smear tests. Every time I ask whether I still need to be on a yearly recall, they say, “We’ll let you know,” and then the following year I have to go back. I am due to go back again, so this debate has prompted me to pick up the phone and arrange that.

I did not take my mum with me to that procedure, because unfortunately she was unable to come, so I took my sister, who is five years younger than me—I was only about 21 or 22. The experience of coming in to watch terrified her; she was there to offer me moral support, but I found myself reassuring her throughout my operation, saying, “Don’t worry, it’s fine. I’m perfectly okay.” I think that we should be a bit more open and honest about these things.

We should also do the brilliant thing that we all do when we get a little embarrassed: laugh about it, because it can actually be quite comical. As I said, I have had so many smear tests, and when my friends are worried about them, I joke about the ridiculous, small piece of blue towel that is meant to preserve our modesty. The midriff is hidden by the piece of blue towel while all the rest is exposed to the world—that is funny. It was also quite funny when, not long after being elected, I was lying there and someone asked, “Are you our local MP?” I said, “Oh, yes. I am.” We then proceeded to have a conversation about how I was finding life at Westminster. I said, “Well, slightly more comfortable than this, thank you very much!” We should find those things funny and we should laugh.

While I am in the sharing mood, I have a little tip for all the women out there. If, like me, they suffer from a hidden cervix—apparently mine is quite shy—a towel or cushion under the bottom lifts it up so it comes into view. That is a little bit of health advice while I am here.

In all seriousness, there is a growing problem. In Hull, the figure for women having smear tests has dropped to only 73.1%—that is a huge fall. The figure is slightly higher in East Riding, at around 78%, but that is nowhere near the 80% for which the NHS is aiming. I echo the words of all hon. Friends and hon. Members who have spoken when I say that the Government need to conduct some kind of survey to find out why. Is the problem, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) said, that women associate smear tests with sexual activity? Do they think that they have no need for one? Do their working hours mean that they are not able to attend tests? Let us find out and make life that bit easier for all of them.

We know, when looking at the NHS cure rates, that 92% of those whose cancer was detected are cured. That is wonderful. I cannot possibly say what would have happened to me had mine not been removed—I do
not know. I am here today, all is well, and I will book my next smear test. Some 66% of all those diagnosed after developing symptoms are also cured. We need to do more to push that message out to people and get rid of the myths. I absolutely support what my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) said in his beautiful speech about the importance of reducing the age to 18 under a doctor’s advice.

I have been involved in a campaign for teaching menstrual wellbeing in schools, on the education side of the issue, because I am not sure that everybody understands what the abnormal signs or symptoms are. I became involved in the campaign through my support for the charity Endometriosis UK, but I think that removing the taboo around periods, smear tests and so on would also help a lot of people. We must start talking in schools about menstrual wellbeing, what normal and abnormal periods are, and what normal and abnormal symptoms are. If we start to have that conversation, we will give people the language and ability to talk about the matter without feeling really shy and saying, “I’ve got a problem with my—I can’t say the word.”

We should be able to talk about it, which reminds me of a brilliant story. When I was doing a radio show for my campaign on vaginal mesh, I spoke to the show’s producer before I was due to speak live. He said, “We’re very supportive of the campaign, but it’s a breakfast show, Emma, so could you not say the word ‘vagina’?” I therefore spent the entire interview talking about problems with “mesh” that was “in” women’s bodies. We need to dispel all of that nonsense and shyness and start being a little more open, and I implore the Minister to work with the Schools Minister in support of my call for menstrual wellbeing to be taught in schools.

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady about how, for some reason, we cannot talk about parts of our bodies at that time in the morning. In the same way, I still find it incredible that adverts for sanitary products depict women’s period blood as being blue rather than red. I do not know about anyone else, but I have never bled blue in my life.

Emma Hardy: Perhaps that is the royal family only. The hon. Lady about how, for some reason, we cannot talk about parts of our bodies at that time in the morning. In the same way, I still find it incredible that adverts for sanitary products depict women’s period blood as being blue rather than red. I do not know about anyone else, but I have never bled blue in my life.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I am grateful to be able to speak in the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for introducing it, and I welcome everyone in the Public Gallery. Natasha’s friends and family who are here have definitely brightened up the gallery and this debate, and we are grateful.

I pay tribute to Natasha Sale, a brave young woman who organised the petition that we are debating. As we heard, she was diagnosed with metastatic cervical cancer before passing away on new year’s eve last year—a 31-year-old woman who left behind four children. It is incredibly sad to hear that she never got to see this moment through, but I hope that, by having the debate, we pay tribute to her tenacity and her commitment to ensure that it was heard. On the petition webpage, she wrote:

“If I can do anything with my life I want to make this change happen, it’s too late for me but it’s not too late for the next generation of young ladies.”

That is a truly brave statement. I am only sorry that she could not make it to see the campaign debated on the Floor of the House. We are, however, very grateful to have all those present in the Public Gallery.

Natasha’s bravery and selflessness to the last in the face of that horrendous disease is truly humbling and should be commended by all. In doing so, we must also recognise the commitment of her family and friends who continued her endeavour to reach more than 100,000 signatures on the petition, which is a feat in itself. In raising awareness of cervical cancer through their campaign and by encouraging women to take smear tests, they have undoubtedly already saved lives.

Breaking the taboo is so important in the fight against cervical cancer. This debate should serve not only as a motivation for every young women who is scared to get regular check-ups and to see their GP, but as a reminder—I am sure it has reminded many of us present—never to be too busy to do the same.

Contributions from hon. Members in all parts of the House are most welcome, and it is always a pleasure to have men speak in these debates because, as the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) rightly pointed out, for too many years in this House such issues as this one have been seen as women’s issues. They are not women’s issues, because every man has a mother, a wife, a daughter or a sister, so the discussion should be had by everyone. It is therefore most welcome to have had those contributions.

I will summarise some of the contributions. The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) raised cases from his constituency and others, especially that of the young woman who, sadly, died around Christmas last year because she was denied access because she was under 25. That she is not here at this point is a great sadness. The hon. Member for Darlington highlighted how the debate should be part of everyone’s agenda, not only on behalf of their constituents but to raise awareness that it is not just a women’s issue. I also join the calls of the hon. Members for Warrington North and for Henley (John Howell) for the Government to keep the matter under review.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) brought a bit of light-heartedness to the debate. As harrowing and awful as this is, it is important to find a way to laugh. I found myself in a similar position and, up in stirrups, someone telling me, “Oh, that’s where I know you from”—easily the strangest time to be recognised, and a little bit weird. None the less, I had gone to have my smear test.

Emma Hardy:
The hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle and for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), and my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) gave very personal contributions. The House is always richer when people share such experiences and give voice to the many more people who do not have a platform. I am grateful to each and every Member who shared in their contributions—they were deeply personal, but we appreciate their honesty and candour.

I also pay tribute to Jo’s Trust, especially because it has actively sought to ensure access to GP services. That is particularly important not only in England but in Scotland, so that people know they can access such services.

Cervical cancer is the most common cancer in women aged between 25 and 35 years old. I find myself in that bracket, so I use this opportunity to encourage every young woman in Scotland: please, have your smear test done if it has been a while or you have never done it. Now is absolutely the time, with about six women in Scotland diagnosed every week—please, do not be scared. Go and have that done. It is so important.

We know that smear tests are the best protection against that form of cancer. A test is not the most comfortable or nicest experience, but it has to be done, because when tests are done, they are estimated to save about 5,000 lives each and every year across the UK, and to prevent eight out of 10 cervical cancers from developing. Despite that remarkable fact, however, the most up-to-date figures show that, as we heard, only 73% of eligible women accept the offer of a test—but, ultimately, that means that 27% of eligible women do not, and they miss out on a potentially lifesaving trip to the doctor.

I have heard some of the reasons why people avoid participating in the tests, as the hon. Member for Warrington North also told us. The test might be said to be intrusive, offensive, scary or gross but, although it is not a pleasant experience, that is not a reason not to have it. While it is true there are more fun things than getting a smear test, the same can be said about a number of other routine check-ups. I do not particularly like going to the doctor or the dentist, but doing so is important.

Clearly, more work has to be done to encourage the take-up of screenings among certain groups of the population. As we heard, evidence shows lower participation in cervical screening among young women living in areas of deprivation, women with a learning or physical disability, black or minority ethnic women, and lesbian and bisexual women—the myth among those women, myself included, was that they should not have to have a smear test because they are sleeping with someone of the same gender. As my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston rightly highlighted, the test is also for those who are trans. It is easy to assume that this is a women’s issue, but it is an everyone issue.

In Scotland, we are working hard to ensure that all those at risk see the importance of attending cervical screenings through public awareness campaigns to tackle the fears that people might have about having a smear test. The contrast remains apparent between the least and most deprived areas, however: 78% of women who live in the least deprived areas attend their smear test, whereas only 67% took up the offer in the most deprived areas. Ultimately, those in the most deprived areas are least likely to attend. I hope the Minister recognises those figures and looks at what the Government can do to raise awareness in those areas. That proves that we have so much work left to do.

In Scotland, we are introducing tests for HPV within the routine smear test to allow for earlier detection and more effective treatment. Health Scotland has produced a toolkit to help GPs, practice nurses and practice staff to optimise uptake, reduce barriers and ensure that women make an informed choice about cervical screening.

Despite those efforts, according to a recent study, 72% of young women said that they had delayed a test or never went for screening because they felt embarrassed. I do not know about anyone else, but I dread to think that the notion of “dying of embarrassment” could truly be the case. I hope we can do more so that young women know they should not feel embarrassed and ashamed. We must do more to encourage women to get further screening. If we break the taboo, we will save lives.

We should use the opportunity of World Cancer Day on 4 February to raise awareness and to encourage women to come forward. We should use the House as a platform not just to speak about Brexit—I am sorry to mention that word—but to tackle the issues that affect women so much.

5.40 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for introducing this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I, too, pay tribute to Natasha Sale, who started this important petition. As others have said, it is so sad that she did not live to see this debate take place. Her family, I am sure, are very proud of her.

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate: the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), and my hon. Friends the Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), whose speech was excellent and we will not forget any time soon. I thank the hon. Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), who spoke on behalf of the SNP. It has been an excellent debate with very good contributions and lots of sharing. I am a classic oversharer, but I will try to resist the urge. Finally, I thank the 167,000 people who have signed the petition so far.

This is a very timely debate, because Cervical Cancer Prevention Week concluded only yesterday. The age to start screening is a very emotive issue. Every year in the UK, more than 3,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer. As we have heard, 15% of those women are under 30. Last year, 12 of those under 30 died from cervical cancer. The number of cervical cancer deaths has fallen in recent years, but it remains the most common cancer in women aged 35 and under. That is why I welcomed preventive measures such as the introduction of the HPV vaccination, which was offered to adolescent girls in secondary school.

My daughter was one of the first to receive the vaccination when she was 13. I was very pleased to give that permission; I would not have hesitated for a second
to give it, although as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North said, a number of people do not give permission. That is very concerning; genuine concerns will have led them to that decision, but we must do what we can to allay their fears. We heard about the catch-up programme at the time, to ensure that all girls up to the age of 18 were vaccinated.

At that time, I looked extensively into this policy area, following a campaign by Washington constituent, Claire Walker Everett, and her family. Claire led the campaign before her untimely death at the age of 23 in 2008, and her family continued it for some time afterwards. I called for a further catch-up programme to address what I called the “seven-year gap”, so that women between 18 and 25 could be vaccinated until they were eligible for smear tests. I said that the gap would close each year until almost all under-25s had been vaccinated, as is now the case. That was 10 years ago, so that gap has closed. Many of those first vaccinated are approaching 25 and are eligible for a smear test, so we should have a whole generation of young women and girls who mostly have been vaccinated against the HPV virus, to help protect them from cervical cancer.

The vaccination programme has been very successful on the whole, with a high national uptake of around 85%. However, I have previously raised with the Minister the significant regional differences in the uptake of the HPV vaccination, which need to be addressed. The lowest uptake for the two doses is in Stockton-on-Tees, at 48.3%; the highest uptake is in East Renfrewshire, at 95.6%. That is curious, and flies in the face of the screening statistics cited by hon. Members, which show that the north-east reached higher rates than others. Perhaps the differences are in pockets rather than whole regions.

I therefore ask the Minister what steps he is taking to investigate and address the regional inequalities in HPV vaccinations and screening. How do the Government ensure that the HPV vaccinations are taken up by the vast majority of girls? Otherwise, the reassurance of my earlier statement that a whole generation of women and girls approaching 25 have been vaccinated falls short in certain areas, which is extremely concerning. Cervical smear tests are available to women aged 25 to 64, yet cervical screening is at a 21-year low. Last year, it was discovered that more than 40,000 women have missed out on crucial information about cervical screening appointments and test results. Has the Minister made any assessment of the impact that this has had on uptake? Can the Minister give assurances that this issue has been solved?

According to Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust, which I commend for its tireless work and campaigning, one in four women across the UK do not attend cervical screenings. That proportion increases to one in three among those aged 25 to 29, when they are first eligible for screening, and to one in two in some of the most deprived regions in the UK. That decline can be for a host of reasons, such as fear or embarrassment.

I pay tribute to TV shows that show the medical equipment involved in a smear test; the “Victoria Derbyshire” show even showed a smear test live on the show on Friday, in an attempt to address those reasons. There was no wincing or obvious cries of pain, so it will have been reassuring to someone who has not had one, although I am sure some viewers complained that it was not suitable daytime viewing. Aside from doing more of that, will the Minister tell me what steps he is taking to increase take-up? Additionally, what steps is he taking to educate women on the need for cervical smears and what the tests are for? I understand that some women believe that a cervical smear will also detect ovarian cancer—as he knows, that is not the case.

As I mentioned, most women under the age of 25 have received the HPV vaccination, giving them excellent protection from the HPV virus. That means that the reason that once may have existed to lower the screening age no longer does. However, I say again, that reason falls down in low take-up areas. Additionally, I worry that lowering the eligibility age for a cervical smear test to 18 would cause additional problems and worries for young patients, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North detailed so well in her excellent speech. False positives are more likely in younger women, as they often undergo natural and harmless changes in the cervix that a smear test would identify as cervical abnormalities. In most cases, those abnormalities resolve themselves without any need for treatment.

Treating false positives as cancer can damage the neck of the womb, which can cause a woman to give birth prematurely in any future pregnancies. In women under 25, therefore, the risk is deemed to outweigh the benefit. However, as my hon. Friend said, women should be provided with that information, to make judgments for themselves. Wider education should start in school; my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessel called for that to start as early as possible, to tackle the fear and embarrassment as soon as possible. I also believe that much more research should be done on the age so a decision can be made that is best for all women.

Cervical cancer is very rare in women under 25, with under three cases per 100,000 women. However, every such case is an awful ordeal for the woman and her family, and sometimes it becomes a tragedy, as it did in the case of Natasha Sale. That was also true for Claire Walker Everett from Washington in my constituency, who died at 23 and whose case first brought this issue to my attention, and more recently for Amber Rose Cliff from the neighbouring Sunderland Central constituency, who died in 2017 at the age of 25. If a young woman has abnormal bleeding or symptoms that she is concerned about, she should be taken seriously by her GP and offered a smear test as soon as possible as part of the health investigations into what is causing her symptoms.

I believe that is part of current guidance and best practice, but we have heard clearly that that guidance is not always followed. That was the case in the short life of Amber Rose Cliff. Between the ages of 18 and 21, she went to the doctor around 30 times, complaining of worrying symptoms and asking for a smear test, only to be told 30 times that she was too young and sent away. When she was 21, her mum paid for her to have a smear test privately. The results were devastating. It was cancer, and the cancer had spread. She died just four years later, aged 25. Young women should not be excluded from a valuable screening service just because of their age if they have symptoms, as Amber obviously did. GPs should be aware of cervical cancer symptoms and
know that they should refer young patients who present with such symptoms for smear tests as part of wider investigations.

With all I have said in mind, I conclude that the age for cervical smear tests should remain at 25, on the condition that further research and debate is conducted and tests are offered to those under 25 who present with symptoms. The Government must also ensure that preventive measures such as the HPV vaccination are taken up as fully as possible, and that women who are eligible for a cervical smear test attend their appointments when they are invited or as soon as possible thereafter. I know the Minister cannot drag them all there personally, but I look forward to his response.

5.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger—I shall refer to you again in a moment. I feel somewhat outnumbered, along with the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), but I am rather used to that, having chaired the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer for five years with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). We were often referred to as “Steve and the girls”.

I completely endorse the point by the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) that this is not a women’s issue. Natasha, whom I will come to in a moment, had four children—two of each. It is very much a boys’ issue for them, as it is across the country. “Unless it is your own family and friends, you will only hear these stories occasionally.” That is how I feel about Natasha’s death, I saw a quote from Amanda Scott, her best friend, who said:

“God only takes the best”.

I thought that was a lovely quote. We have heard that many times before, but I was interested in how that was reported.

As the Minister responsible for public health and cancer, cancer prevention and early diagnosis are vital priorities for me. I am delighted to see Natasha’s army here today. I saw the pictures on the bus on social media this morning, with some interesting hand signals—I must ask them about that. It is very good to see them all here. I hope they know, as Members know, that I will continue wholeheartedly to support the efforts of the NHS and Public Health England, which I hold to account, and of all our excellent cancer charities, which work as part of team cancer to prevent cancer and reduce the number of families who have to go through what Natasha’s family is going through.

There have been so many interesting speeches. Luckily, for once I have time to touch on a number of them, if not all of them. I was very interested in the point made by the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) about the data showing that take-up is better in the north-east than almost anywhere else. I was interested in what she had to say about the reasons behind that. The NHS as a system too infrequently talks to Members of Parliament, who know their areas better than most. I will ask Sir Mike Richards to contact her, perhaps along with the hon. Member for City of Chester, who is obviously still waiting for an introduction. I am very happy to facilitate that. Her other point was about access, which many Members mentioned. I will ensure that her very good point about disabled women is fed into Sir Mike Richards’s review, and I encourage her to raise that with him when she sees him.

[Ian Austin in the Chair]

I will come to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who introduced the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, because many of the points she raised will come up in my speech. I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Henley talked about the “Be Clear on Cancer” campaign and the new Public Health England campaign that will be rolled out next month. He mentioned the role of GPs in those campaigns. “Be Clear on Cancer” is a public-facing campaign, but elements of it relate to GP education, which I will come to. He often makes very good points in our debates, and I thank him for raising that topic. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) also mentioned GP understanding, which I will touch on.

The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) made a very personal speech. She said she is awaiting results, and I think I speak for everyone when I say we wish her well. We will be thinking of her, and our fingers are crossed for her. She made a point about the trans community, which I had not heard mentioned in this context. NHS England has published clear guidance for trans men—people who have changed from male to female. Trans men who still have a cervix and have not had a hysterectomy remain entitled to screening. If a trans man is still registered with their GP as a female, they will continue to receive invitations for screening. If they are registered as a male, they remain eligible for screening but will not automatically be invited. The guidance makes clear that trans men need to request screening from their GP. I thank her for raising that point, which is another that I want to feed into Sir Mike’s screening review.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) made a brilliant speech, as always. She should be on the stage. The rather unconventional advice surgery she talked about may not catch on, but I enjoyed hearing about it. We constituency MPs all dread somebody saying, “I’m sure I know you from somewhere.” She talked about education, particularly in schools. Public Health England has a range of materials aimed at providing teenagers and their parents with information about things such as the HPV vaccination programme. She will know that the Department for Education is also working on new relationships and sex education guidance. Its consultation closed in November. That guidance, which will include input from Health Education England, will be published in the first half of this year.
I took the Teenage Cancer Trust and CoppaFeel—a breast cancer charity with possibly the best name of any cancer charity—to see my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards at the end of last year. We were very keen to make the point to them that we must improve awareness in schools of health, bodies and particularly cancers, but in a balanced way that educates children about warning signs without frightening the life out of them. I think we have struck that balance, and I think Members will be pleased when they see that guidance rolled out in the first half of 2019.

Steve Brine: Indeed. If the hon. Lady is not satisfied with what I say now, then please come back and we will make sure that she gets more information after the debate. Self-testing for HPV is an emerging area of medicine. It is not in the same place as the fecal immunochemical test for bowel cancer, but it is an emerging and exciting area of policy. I echo all the positive words that have been said about Jo’s Trust, Jo herself and Rob Music, who runs that charity.

Members will be aware that the NHS offers cervical screening to all eligible women aged 25 to 49 every three years and to those aged 50 to 64 every five years. The screening is designed to detect abnormalities of the cervix at an early stage so that women can be referred for effective treatment. It is important to remember that the purpose of population screening is to reduce mortality and morbidity from cancer and other conditions—that is why we do it—in people who appear healthy and have no symptoms, by detecting conditions at an earlier, more treatable stage. Hence prevention is better than cure.

The purpose of any screening service is to maximise the chances of healthier outcomes and, by association, minimise risk of harm to the whole population. With this in mind, the UK National Screening Committee considers the evidence on whether population level screening should be offered and makes recommendations to Ministers. It is not Ministers who make this stuff up, and nor should we. Using research evidence such as pilot programmes and economic evaluation, the NSC assesses the evidence for programmes against a set of internationally recognised criteria. It is important that these recommendations are made by experts based on the best available evidence, and not by politicians.

On this basis, in 2012 the UK NSC recommended that women should be invited for their first cervical screening at the age of 25. This recommendation was based on evidence that showed that the majority of women below this age would receive little benefit from being screened and treated, which can lead to unnecessary treatment, as we have heard from hon. Members. It is very rare that cervical cancer occurs in women under 25—as the shadow Minister said, there are fewer than three cases per 100,000 women. That is no consolation to someone who, like Natasha, is one of those three who pays the ultimate cost. I am only setting out the facts as they are.

Younger women often undergo natural and harmless changes in the cervix—it is part of their physiology—and screening could identify those as cervical abnormalities. In most cases the abnormalities resolve themselves without any need for intervention. The recommendation picked up by the NSC in 2012 concurred with a major review by the Advisory Committee on Cervical Screening undertaken in 2009, so the advice goes quite a long way back. The hon. Member for Warrington North asked me whether the NSC would publish its evidence on the decision to screen from the age of 25. The NSC publishes minutes of all its meetings and the full rationale behind any recommendations. However, I will ask Public Health England and the UK-NSC to publish any relevant evidence used by the NSC in reaching its conclusions and on which they based their recommendations that is not already in the public domain, which I hope she will be pleased to hear.
I will talk about HPV primary screening. Every life is precious and we cannot be complacent in continuing to do all we can to prevent cancer—those who know me know that I am not complacent. Therefore, we are modernising the cervical cancer screening programme by introducing the detection of human papillomavirus as the primary test in the NHS cervical screening programme. I can confirm that this will be implemented across England by 2020. Cancer Research UK estimates that, when fully implemented, HPV primary screening could prevent an additional 600 cases of cancer every year. As we have heard, almost all cervical cancers are caused by HPV, which is a very common sexually transmitted infection which is linked to the development of the disease.

In addition to changing the primary test in the cervical screening programme itself, I want to highlight that vaccination against HPV, introduced in 2008 under the previous Government, is now routinely recommended for all girls aged 12 to 13. In England and Wales the first dose is offered in school year 8. The programme aims to prevent cervical cancer related to HPV infection and the best way to do that is to vaccine girls and young women. We are fortunate to have achieved good uptake of the HPV vaccination in adolescent girls since 2008.

The first cohort of teenage girls to receive the HPV vaccination in year 8—those born in September 1996—will turn 23 this year and become eligible for routine screening in two years’ time. It will be of intense interest to all of us to see what impact the vaccination will have on the number of abnormalities detected through routine cervical screening and we will be monitoring this very carefully. I will be watching it like a hawk, as Members would expect. We have already seen that the vaccine has led to a reduction in HPV infection in young women and we anticipate a fall in the numbers diagnosed with cervical cancer at the age of 23 to 24 this year.

Boys have received a level of protection from the girls’ vaccination programme over the last 10 years and we have had debates in the House about that. I referred to the previous Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), because he led a debate in the House about HPV vaccination for boys and there was a lot of debate about it. A lot of people said that the boys get herd immunity and therefore they do not need the vaccination programme. Again, I am led by the evidence and the advice that I am given, but my personal view was that I did not agree with the herd immunity argument. I was pleased that I agreed with the advice and from September 2019, all boys aged 12 and 13 will also be offered the HPV vaccination against HPV-related diseases, such as oral, throat, penile and anal cancer. I know the hon. Member for Rotherham wanted to hear about that. That will help reduce the incidence of HPV infection circulating in the population.

It is worth saying that, although HPV infection is the primary cause of cervical cancer, many other cancers, such as head and neck cancer, will be seen a long way down the line. Without wishing to be indecisive, I am told that the popularity of oral sex means that HPV vaccination will have a big impact on the incidence of oral cancers. As the dental Minister, I often hear from dentists that that is a growing problem, so I am pleased that we are able to make a positive policy response, which has been well received.

As the hon. Members for Warrington North and for Rotherham said, there are plenty of people who disagree with HPV vaccination. Whenever I speak on the subject—I can feel the tweets landing in my inbox as we speak—I open myself up to the responses of those who vehemently disagree. All I can say is that I think they are wrong and that that is what the evidence suggests. This is a free society and they are of course entitled to that opinion, but we base policy decisions on the evidence. That is where we are. What I have said about the HPV vaccination for girls, and now boys, is important, but I reiterate the message that it is still important for women who have been vaccinated to attend their cervical screening appointments when invited. It does not turn people into Wonder Woman.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West asked me what we are doing about education for young adults on HPV vaccination, and regional variations in uptake, a point that she has raised with me before. NHS England works in close liaison with Public Health England to deliver the HPV vaccination programme for girls, and in future for boys, and closely monitors uptake rates. It sends me regular reports. Local NHS England commissioners have access to those uptake rates in their area and, in due course, so will MPs. They work with providers, schools and healthcare professionals to improve coverage, sharing best practice where relevant. It became clear to me when looking at the information that there are variations, which is a concern. I made my concerns about regional variation in vaccination uptake clear to the NHS and have had meetings with NHS England and Public Health England on a number of occasions—twice in recent months—asking for additional action to increase uptake across England. I want them back in my office on a regular basis to report to me. That somehow seems to stimulate them.

I am pleased that the NHS long-term plan featured involving local co-ordinators to encourage uptake. That came out of those meetings along with various other commitments to improve vaccination rates, not just for HPV but across the vaccination piece. That includes requiring CCGs to ensure that all vaccination programmes are designed to support a narrowing of health inequalities. They know that I remain on their case. If the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West would like to continue the conversation on that with me, I should be pleased to hear it.

The review that the Secretary of State has asked Sir Mike Richards to carry out has been mentioned. Cervical cancer affects many women and their families, and screening can help to prevent many people from developing cancer each year. It is obviously important that women take up their screening appointments to help spot abnormalities. However, with uptake only at about 75%, we know that we need to make it easier to book appointments and more convenient for women to attend them—that point about access came up a number of times in the debate.

I met Mike recently and said that I have an app on my phone that tells me when my car is due for a service and lets me book a local appointment at a time that suits me. We do not embrace that kind of no-brainer technology with HPV but across the vaccination piece. That includes requiring CCGs to ensure that all vaccination programmes are designed to support a narrowing of health inequalities. They know that I remain on their case. If the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West would like to continue the conversation on that with me, I should be pleased to hear it.
of access. Doing that will, I am sure, improve uptake rates. That is one key reason why we are considering comprehensively how our current national screening programmes can be improved, particularly in the light of recent issues that could affect public confidence in screening and lower uptake.

Professor Sir Mike Richards will be leading a review of all three cancer screening programmes, which of course includes cervical screening. His review will report in the summer and will specifically assess the strengths and weaknesses of the individual programmes. It will also address, as I have just outlined, how the latest innovations can be utilised and integrated with research to encourage more people to be screened, and to make it easier for them to do so. That point was raised by many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Henley, who is no longer in his place, have raised the matter of GPs. Guidance for GPs has been developed and published, specifically aimed at improving the primary care of young women who present with gynaecological symptoms. That guidance, produced by a multidisciplinary group, including professionals, patients and the voluntary sector, and endorsed by the relevant royal colleges, offers clinical practice guidelines for the assessment of young women aged 20-24 who present with abnormal vaginal bleeding. GPs are continually made aware of the symptoms of cervical cancer and the need to refer women under the age of 25 for further investigation. From today’s debate, it sounds as if we have further to go, but we knew that, of course. As part of the delivery of essential medical services under the National Health Service (General Medical Services Contract) Regulations 2004, GP practices must offer consultations and, where appropriate, they must also offer physical examinations for the purposes of identifying the need, if any, for treatment or further investigation and, if needed, referring the patient onwards as soon as possible. The hon. Member for Rotherham made an excellent point about understanding the history of trauma that some women on their lists had had. Obviously it is a subject that she has a lot of experience of in her constituency; I thank her for making that excellent point, and I will ensure it is fed into the Mike Richards review.

I have mentioned the “Be Clear on Cancer” campaign a couple of times, and said that Public Health England will work to raise awareness of this disease through that campaign, which we have run in partnership with Cancer Research UK since 2011. It has covered many different areas and is scheduled to promote the uptake of cervical screening from next month.

While we are still on the awareness point, in the 2016 Budget the Government announced that Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust, which does so much good work in this area, as has been said, would be a beneficiary of the tampon tax. It received £650,000 in funding to kick-start a campaign to get closer to eradicating cervical cancer. I take part in many of these debates and talk about cancer, as does the shadow Minister. One third of cancers are preventable and two thirds of cancers are just bad luck. With some cancers, we are nowhere near, but this is a cancer we can get rid of. This is a “bad” that we can eradicate. That is why we are so determined to get it over the line.

Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust ran a campaign on eradication in 2017 and 2018; it was a wide-reaching awareness programme, with a specific focus on groups where there is a higher prevalence of non-attendance of cervical screening: interestingly, that is women from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, women from disadvantaged backgrounds—a point already made—and women in the 25-to-29 and over-50 brackets. The funding enabled the trust to provide targeted education and information to those groups and to produce a body of evidence on the barriers to screening and how to overcome them.

Jenny Chapman: It is encouraging to hear what the Minister says, and his comments about the legacy of Jade Goody and others. It is a tremendous thing that they have left to us, with the campaigns we have benefited from. However, is there not, up to a point, cause for concern in that the examples being used are younger women, which could reinforce the misinformation about the need for younger women to be more concerned about cervical cancer—and therefore for older women to be less concerned? Sometimes I wonder whether the prominence given to the examples in question may create an issue for another group of women.

Steve Brine: The hon. Lady makes a good point, and there is always a danger with public awareness campaigns, even down to the models, actors and actresses used in the advertising campaigns, with presentation and positioning. I take the point, and Public Health England, which works on such campaigns for me, will also take the point the hon. Lady raises. I assure her it will be sent a copy of the debate.

A number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Henley, who is no longer in his place, have raised the matter of GPs. Guidance for GPs has been developed and published, specifically aimed at improving the primary care of young women who present with gynaecological symptoms. That guidance, produced by a multidisciplinary group, including professionals, patients and the voluntary sector, and endorsed by the relevant royal colleges, offers clinical practice guidelines for the assessment of young women aged 20-24 who present with abnormal vaginal bleeding. GPs are continually made aware of the symptoms of cervical cancer and the need to refer women under the age of 25 for further investigation. From today’s debate, it sounds as if we have further to go, but we knew that, of course. As part of the delivery of essential medical services under the National Health Service (General Medical Services Contract) Regulations 2004, GP practices must offer consultations and, where appropriate, they must also offer physical examinations for the purposes of identifying the need, if any, for treatment or further investigation and, if needed, referring the patient onwards as soon as possible. The hon. Member for Rotherham made an excellent point about understanding the history of trauma that some women on their lists had had. Obviously it is a subject that she has a lot of experience of in her constituency; I thank her for making that excellent point, and I will ensure it is fed into the Mike Richards review.

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The trust found that some young people do not attend appointments because they are embarrassed; that finding received a lot of press coverage and came out in Prime Minister’s questions last year. Others do not think the test is important, and yet more do not think they are at risk because they lead healthy lifestyles. One in four do not attend their screening appointment, and that needs to change, so this is important work.

From talking to Rob from Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust, I know that one thing they found on the roadshows when they were testing this work in 2017 and 2018 was the importance of talking to women’s partners and the role next Government—indicating, or nagging—whatever word we choose to use—women about taking up their screening appointments. Last week, the trust led their annual cervical cancer awareness week, with an event here in Parliament. The aim is to help as many people as possible to know how they can reduce the risk of the disease, and to promote that among their constituents.

The #SmearForSmear campaign reinforces the message that smear tests prevent 75% of cervical cancers, so while they may not be pleasant, as we have heard, they are important. I was pleased to support them myself, as most of the Health team did, at the event in Parliament last week, and I thank all hon. Members who took part; I know Jo’s Trust found it helpful. As Natasha’s Army says—this is such an important message—we need to support all young women to “lose the fear, take the smear”.

If I may try to draw my remarks to a close, this Government—as did the previous Government, and as will the next Government—recognise that cervical cancer is a devastating disease, and we are committed to providing well-managed screening programmes based on the most up-to-date, peer-reviewed evidence. Cancer is right at the heart of the NHS long-term plan, which was published on 7 January, and I am very proud of that fact. The plan sets out a comprehensive package of measures that will transform cancer diagnosis and treatment across the country over the next 10 years, a decade in which patients can expect to see vast improvements in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancer. The aim is to see 55,000 more people surviving cancer for five years in England each year from 2028. That is quite an ambition, but we will get there.

Cervical screening saves an estimated 5,000 lives a year, and the Government are committed to continuing to do all we can to prevent cancer and ensure early diagnosis, which is often rightly called cancer’s “magic key”, so that more families do not have to go through these personal tragedies, as the Sales have done. We are up for the fight. I thank everyone for taking part.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 29 January 2019

[Ms Nadine Dorries in the Chair]

Children with Life-limiting Conditions

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move, that this House has considered support for children with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions and their families.

I am conscious that other people want to speak, so I will limit my time and give them a chance to contribute, Ms Dorries. I am pleased to see the Minister in her place. I spoke to her last week and before today's debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this important debate and the Minister for her attendance. I also thank everyone who is here to speak on behalf of their constituents. This matter is not for my constituency alone; it needs to be addressed UK-wide in a co-ordinated manner. As for the magnitude of the issue, 49,000 babies, children and young people live in the UK with health conditions that are life-limiting or life-threatening, and the number is rising. There are 40,000 in England alone.

I have three wonderful children and three perfect grandchildren. They are the best in the world, but every grandparent probably thinks that about their grandchildren. Hearing the news that one's child has a life-limiting condition and is likely to die young is devastating. My heart always goes out to those who hear such dreadful news. The children have complex and unpredictable conditions and often need round-the-clock care seven days a week. Families have to cope with the knowledge that their child will die before them, and daily life for the whole family can become extremely challenging.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and congratulate him on securing this debate. Will he join me in praising the children's hospice movement, including Ty Hafan, which serves my constituency in south Wales, for their excellent work in providing care not only for the children but for the families who need support?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely right. By the way, several of today's speakers applied for this debate along with me and I thank them also. Hospice care is important and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. Every one of us knows the role that hospices play in the lives of those who need help at a very difficult time. Although there are many excellent services, many families still have difficulty accessing the care and support that they need, which is why hospices are important.

Children with life-threatening conditions need palliative care from when their condition is diagnosed or recognised until the end of their lives. Families also need care and support throughout the trajectory of their child's illness, including bereavement care after they have passed away. Palliative care for children includes, but is not limited to end-of-life care, and the two terms should not be used interchangeably.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise, as highlighted by CLIC Sargent, the financial cost? It might be the last thing that people think about when everything else is going on, but there is a huge financial cost. The costs associated with cancer treatment are estimated to be around £600 a month extra, and the travel costs are on average £180 per family. For some people that is a huge amount of money.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and reiterate the point he has made. The financial implications, restrictions and pressures are important. I know CLIC Sargent well. It does massive fundraising in my constituency and elsewhere. I appreciate its work immensely.

Children's palliative care providers offer a range of services, including supporting families to manage their children's pain and distressing symptoms; providing children and their families with lifeline short breaks; and offering bereavement support both before and after the child has passed away. Families want to be able to choose where they receive the lifeline children's palliative care services that they rely on when they need and want them. They also want to choose who cares for their child and which treatments they receive.

Along with others, I am a vice-chair of the all-party group for children who need palliative care. We seek to educate, inform and motivate parliamentarians to take action to help transform the lives of children and young people with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are supported to do so by our secretariat, Together for Short Lives, the UK's leading charity for the 49,000 children living with life-limiting conditions and their families. In November 2017, the all-party group began a Select Committee-style inquiry into the extent to which the Government are meeting their choice in end-of-life care commitment for babies, children and young people. The Government are clear that that commitment applies to people of all ages who need palliative care. The commitment explicitly states: “To support high quality personalised care for children and young people, commissioners and providers of services must prioritise children's palliative care in their strategic planning”.

Prioritising children's palliative care in strategic planning is so important.

In a report last October, the all-party group published what we found and what action we recommend as a result of our inquiry. Despite the end-of-life care commitment, the APPG has heard evidence from young people, families, services and professionals that the quality of palliative care that children and families can access is patchy—the reason for today's debate—and depends on what part of England they live in. MPs and peers have stated that that is unfair and represents a wholly unjustified health inequality.

The APPG highlighted five areas of particular concern where many children and their families have limited access. The first is children's palliative care out of hours and at weekends. They also need short breaks and respite. As MPs we know these things, but the respite that is needed is so important to the parents' break. Age-appropriate palliative care and smooth transitions to adult services must be smoother, simpler and less stressful. Specialist children's palliative care teams led
by level 4 consultants are needed, and we need advance care planning. Those five barriers explain why the Government’s choice commitment is at serious risk of not being met, which is why we are having this debate.

I am very pleased to see the Minister and the shadow Minister in their places. I know they both understand the issues. That certainly came out in my discussions with the Minister last week. Today we hope to hear the responses that we need to satisfy our concerns.

The first area of concern is leadership and accountability. Almost half—46%—of clinical commissioning groups are failing to implement the Government’s choice in end-of-life care commitment and have no plans to do so, which is disappointing, but there are reasons for it. Only a third of CCGs responded that they are implementing the guidance, and a further 19% stated that their plans to do so are in development. Consequently, will the Government and NHS England consider appropriate mechanisms to bridge the children’s palliative care accountability gap? Furthermore, will the Government develop a system to monitor how sustainability and transformation partnerships, integrated care systems, CCGs and local authorities are supporting children’s palliative care in accordance with their legal duties? That is very important. Will the Government develop outcome indicators that measure the extent to which children with life-limiting conditions and their families can make choices about the palliative care that they receive? If so, will they reflect the outcomes set out in the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence quality standard for end-of-life care for infants, children and young people?

The second area concerns clarity. Will the Minister work with her colleagues at the Department for Education and NHS England to write to STPs, ICSs, CCGs and local authorities to clarify which parts of the health and care system in England are responsible for commissioning palliative care for children and young people aged 0 to 25? We always go on about data, but data is important to get a strategy that works. It is vital to make it clear who is responsible for commissioning short breaks and specialised children’s palliative care, as described by NHS England.

The third area is funding. Unfortunately, there has been a downward spiral in the trajectory of funding: 22% in 2016-17 and 2015-16 compared with 23% in 2014-15 and 27% in 2013-14. That downward trend worries us greatly. There was a wide range in the state’s contributions to voluntary care sector children’s palliative care providers’ charitable costs in 2015-16. The maximum contribution received by a charity in 2015-16 was more than half and the lowest was 2%. Like other members of the APPG, I was therefore pleased to welcome NHS England’s recent decision to commit to funding children’s palliative care in the long-term plan. However, I want to highlight that mismatch in the two announcements that NHS England made.

On 27 December, NHS England announced that up to £18 million would be available to children’s hospices through the long-term plan, of which £7 million would depend on CCGs contributing £8 million through match funding, which is far enough, taking the total to £25 million. Yet in paragraph 3.41 of the plan, published on 7 January, NHS England said that the £25 million would be for local children’s palliative and end-of-life care services, including children’s hospices. Does the Minister recognise that the two NHS England announcements were confusing, and can she clarify whether the £25 million will be for children’s hospices only, or a wider group of services? We need answers to those points. I gave the Minister advance notice of all my questions. It was almost the highest number of questions I have ever asked a Minister at one time, even though I asked a lot of questions.

Can the Minister guarantee that the £11 million children’s hospice grant will be protected and increased as a result of the long-term plan, to reflect the growing demand and the complexity of care provided by those lifetime services, and will she guarantee that total NHS funding for children’s palliative care will not fall as a result of the long-term plan? Will she also monitor the amount of money that NHS England, clinical commissioning groups and local authorities are contributing to children and adult hospice and palliative care charities? If so, will she ensure that they bring about parity in the state’s percentage contribution to their charitable costs?

I often refer to the Scottish Government—in the best of terms, as well. I note that they have committed to bringing about parity and funding 50% of the agreed charitable costs of children’s hospices across Scotland. They often set the bar, and set an example for the rest of us to try to achieve. I know that my hon. Friends from the Scottish National party will speak to that, and I look forward to their contributions.

The funding challenges are being exacerbated by the Government’s decision not to provide voluntary sector providers that do not apply “Agenda for Change” pay and conditions with financial support in order to mitigate the recent pay rise for non-clinical NHS staff. Will the Minister provide financial support to help voluntary sector children’s palliative care providers, including children’s hospices that do not apply “Agenda for Change” pay and conditions, to mitigate that recent pay rise?

We have to mention the Government’s proposal to increase the proportion that employers need to contribute to the NHS pension scheme from 14.9% to 20.9%. That will also lead to children’s hospices incurring significant costs. I say very gently that there is an imbalance in what is happening. Although the cost of the increases for NHS organisations will be met by the Government through additional funding, the potential additional costs for charitable hospices will not be.

Children’s hospices are faced with the puzzling situation where NHS England is giving them more money with one hand while, through the pension scheme changes, the Government are taking it away with the other. We all have concerns about that. Will the Minister meet the significant costs that children’s hospices will incur as a result of the Government’s proposal to increase the employers’ contribution to the NHS pension scheme?

The APPG believes that the Government and NHS England should go further to ensure that children’s palliative care provided by the statutory sector, in hospitals and in the community, is funded equitably and sustainably in England. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence calculates that by investing £12.7 million in implementing its guideline on children’s palliative care, non-cash savings worth £34.7 million would be returned back into the NHS. Mathematics is not one of my stronger points, but it seems logical to do that. Will the
Minister undertake a review of the palliative care available to children with life-limiting conditions in England as a matter of urgency, and will she develop a funded, cross-departmental children’s palliative care strategy for achieving better outcomes for children and families across the statutory and voluntary sectors?

There are too few professionals with the skills, knowledge and experience to provide children’s palliative care in hospitals, children’s hospices and the community. Those who are skilled, and have the ability and opportunity, do wonderful work. Will the Minister set out the steps that she is taking to develop and advance care plans with families? Shortages in children’s nurses, and generally in children’s palliative care, are particularly acute.

The final area is integration. Single, joined-up education, health and care assessments, plans and personal budgets for children and young people up to the age of 25 are available only to those who have a special educational need. The APPG is also unclear on how the Government’s approach to personalising palliative care for children and young people, which is underpinned by joint plans and budgets, correlates with the special educational needs and disabilities system. That is tremendously important to us all. I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us whether she plans to ensure that all 40,000 babies, children and young people in England with life-limiting or life-threatening conditions have the right to an integrated assessment, plan and personal budget.

Will the Minister commission a review of health and social care law, to strengthen and clarify rights and entitlements for disabled children and their families, including children with life-limiting conditions? That would help to bring about more integrated assessments and plans. Will she invest in supporting work to develop children’s palliative care managed clinical networks across England?

Mark Tami: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Does he agree that the Government need to speed up, and that they cannot apply the general criteria that they apply to everyone else? Those parents, those families, and those children need support straightaway, not after waiting for weeks—sometimes months.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and his wise words. I absolutely agree that we need to implement right away the response that families need. He is right: one size does not fit all. Every person’s case and circumstances are unique, so we need to respond with something that fits, quickly.

If not quickly met by the Government, those challenges will threaten Ministers’ ability to meet their end-of-life care choice commitment for children by 2020. We have to work to that timescale. We need that response to do away with the patchiness; there are parts where the Government are doing well and families get help, and other parts where they do not. I know that the Minister is committed to that, and hopefully her response will be helpful to all of us who are asking these questions.

We urge the Government to work with the APPG, and interested bodies and charitable groups, to implement the APPG’s recommendations. There has already been progress in the past few weeks. That is good news, and we are pleased about that. NHS England has decided to recognise children’s palliative care as an important priority in the NHS long-term plan.

I commend the Government, I commend the Minister for her commitment to the strategy, and I commend Health Ministers for the Department’s commitment to addressing health, and spending money on it. That is good news. Nobody in this House would not welcome that. I very much welcome it. Will the Minister assess the extent to which the NHS treats children’s palliative care as a priority, as it commits to in the long-term plan, and if so, how? Will she tell us a wee bit about how that long-term strategy and plan will work?

I think it is the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) who says, “Jim Shannon gets more words into a minute than any other MP.” I am not sure that I have given my four-minute speech in one minute, but I have tried to compress what I wanted to say, and I gave the Minister my questions beforehand. There are hon. Members present who have a real knowledge of the subject matter. It is so important that we hear all their opinions as well. I ask the Minister to update us on the progress that the Government are making in responding to all the APPG’s recommendations. I very much look forward to hearing her response. These children need help. The report is clear, and now we need to be clear on how the Government can and will make changes to ensure that these short lives, and the lives of loved family members, can be better. Sometimes we see only the child; we also have to see the families. I think the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) referred to that in his intervention. It is so important that we reach out and help. Our job as MPs is to do just that. We look to the Minister for the response that we all want.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): I will impose an informal five-minute limit on speeches. Obviously, if Members go over the informal limit, I will have to impose a formal four or three-minute limit, so if everybody would realise that and be courteous, that would be great.

9.48 am

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and for his continuing interest in the matter.

It is exceptionally difficult to care for a child with a life-limiting condition. The Government have made progress on making things slightly easier in areas such as bereavement care, but I recognise that more needs to be done to support families who are going through the process, especially in terms of palliative care. The issue affects not just the 49,000 children in the UK who live with life-limiting or life-threatening health conditions, but their families and those who care for them. Those who are suffering from such conditions need the best medical care possible, but the families require care too, whether that is in the form of respite breaks or financial support for adjusting their homes and lives.

I sympathise somewhat with the Minister; she has to respond on behalf of her Department, but it is not just her Department that acts in this space. Local authorities, the voluntary sector and other Departments all have a role to play, and it will be possible to tackle the challenges faced by families only by taking an integrated approach that encompasses all of those groups.
John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions the adjustments that need to be made in people’s homes. To what extent does she think local councils are living up to expectations in that respect?

Antoinette Sandbach: I will come on to that point, but I know that in my area the situation is certainly not as good as it might be.

I hope that the Minister will commit to ensuring that children have a right to an integrated assessment, a plan and a personal budget to address their individual needs. Likewise, I hope that she will agree to review health and social care law, not only to strengthen the rights and entitlements for disabled children and their families, but to clarify them. That clarification would be hugely welcome, because uncertainty leads to some local authorities failing to meet their obligations. For instance, Together for Short Lives reports that 21% of local authorities are failing to meet their legal duty to commission short breaks for disabled children. That postcode lottery is deeply unsatisfactory and requires the Minister’s attention.

I was concerned to discover from December 2017 data that only one of the four Cheshire clinical commissioning groups was developing a strategy or care pathway for children with life-limiting conditions. The same data shows that although some of my area’s CCGs offer out-of-hours paediatric palliative care consultants, community children’s nurses and psychological support, others do not. Given that families have 24/7 responsibility, should not the NHS? My area is lucky to have specialist paediatric care close at hand, thanks to Alder Hey Children’s Hospital, but it is clear that even in Cheshire more must be done, which probably means that more funding must be put in place.

The all-party parliamentary group on baby loss wrote to the Chancellor at the end of last year to ask for a guarantee of the future of the NHS England children’s hospice grant beyond March 2019; for an increase in its value to £25 million per year; for parity of funding between children’s and adult hospice and palliative care charities in England; and for a funded, cross-departmental children’s palliative strategy for England. I was pleased to see that the issue received attention in the NHS long-term plan, but I am concerned by the mismatch between NHS England’s 27 December announcement about children’s hospice funding under the plan, and what was published in the plan itself on 7 January: the announcement said that the money was for hospice funding, but the plan said that it would be for palliative services, including hospices. Will the Minister clarify whether that £25 million will be for children’s hospices only, or for a wider group of children’s palliative care services?

Likewise, will the Minister guarantee that the £11 million children’s hospice grant will be protected and increased as a result of the long-term plan? It is vital that we resolve that, because in 2006-07 the children’s hospice grant contributed 14% towards the cost of providing clinical care in children’s hospices across England, but by 2015-16, when the grant had risen to £11 million, it contributed an average of just 8%.

I hope that the Minister will offer the reassurance that so many families deserve, not just about the finances but about integration and ending the postcode lottery. I am sure all hon. Members agree that these families need support, but now we must build on that agreement and implement a sustainable, compassionate plan to support them.

Antoinette Sandbach: I will come on to that point, but I know that in my area the situation is certainly not as good as it might be.

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Antoinette Sandbach: I will come on to that point, but I know that in my area the situation is certainly not as good as it might be.

I hope that the Minister will commit to ensuring that children have a right to an integrated assessment, a plan and a personal budget to address their individual needs. Likewise, I hope that she will agree to review health and social care law, not only to strengthen the rights and entitlements for disabled children and their families, but to clarify them. That clarification would be hugely welcome, because uncertainty leads to some local authorities failing to meet their obligations. For instance, Together for Short Lives reports that 21% of local authorities are failing to meet their legal duty to commission short breaks for disabled children. That postcode lottery is deeply unsatisfactory and requires the Minister’s attention.

I was concerned to discover from December 2017 data that only one of the four Cheshire clinical commissioning groups was developing a strategy or care pathway for children with life-limiting conditions. The same data shows that although some of my area’s CCGs offer out-of-hours paediatric palliative care consultants, community children’s nurses and psychological support, others do not. Given that families have 24/7 responsibility, should not the NHS? My area is lucky to have specialist paediatric care close at hand, thanks to Alder Hey Children’s Hospital, but it is clear that even in Cheshire more must be done, which probably means that more funding must be put in place.

The all-party parliamentary group on baby loss wrote to the Chancellor at the end of last year to ask for a guarantee of the future of the NHS England children’s hospice grant beyond March 2019; for an increase in its value to £25 million per year; for parity of funding between children’s and adult hospice and palliative care charities in England; and for a funded, cross-departmental children’s palliative strategy for England. I was pleased to see that the issue received attention in the NHS long-term plan, but I am concerned by the mismatch between NHS England’s 27 December announcement about children’s hospice funding under the plan, and what was published in the plan itself on 7 January: the announcement said that the money was for hospice funding, but the plan said that it would be for palliative services, including hospices. Will the Minister clarify whether that £25 million will be for children’s hospices only, or for a wider group of children’s palliative care services?

Likewise, will the Minister guarantee that the £11 million children’s hospice grant will be protected and increased as a result of the long-term plan? It is vital that we resolve that, because in 2006-07 the children’s hospice grant contributed 14% towards the cost of providing clinical care in children’s hospices across England, but by 2015-16, when the grant had risen to £11 million, it contributed an average of just 8%.

I hope that the Minister will offer the reassurance that so many families deserve, not just about the finances but about integration and ending the postcode lottery. I am sure all hon. Members agree that these families need support, but now we must build on that agreement and implement a sustainable, compassionate plan to support them.
That is not the only financial hardship that parents face when they lose a child; as I said, there is also the cost of the funeral. Royal London has found that the average cost of a funeral in 2018 was £3,757. For someone who is not anticipating losing a child, or who is on a low income, that is an insurmountable amount. Some people have actually asked me why I did not have insurance. Why would you insure a child? Why would you consider insuring against a child’s passing?

As hon. Members may be aware, health in Wales is a devolved matter. I am very proud that the Welsh Government led by example and introduced a children’s funeral fund in 2017. I will say only that I had a letter from the Prime Minister on Easter Sunday last year, yet we still do not have a children’s fund throughout the United Kingdom. Scotland has introduced it and, in the absence of Stormont, Northern Ireland has done it on a local level, so it is only parents in England who are not getting support with their child’s funeral. The Welsh Government, who were the first to introduce such a fund, have announced an additional £1 million investment to support the work of the end-of-life care implementation board. That funding will go towards a variety of areas, including training for staff on having difficult end-of-life care conversations with parents.

I give personal thanks for the work of the wonderful charities Ty Hafan, Hope House and Ty Gobaith, which provide care to children and families in my constituency and across Wales. After I lost Martin, I spent a lot of time trying to do what I could to help other families. I provided pastoral care for mentally and physically handicapped children, and I went to work for a children’s cancer charity. I felt like my personal experience would help those parents. Today I still talk to parents who have lost a child and try to reason with them by saying, “The thoughts that you are thinking, the worries that you are having, the fears and the fright that you will experience day in, day out for the rest of your life—they’re real but they’re not abnormal, and you need to share.”

As a country, we should support these people financially and give them that little bit of comfort, so that it is only the emotion—something nobody can ever help you with. I urge the Minister to do whatever she can to provide that little bit of comfort, so that it is only the emotion that remains.

I commend the work of the Donna Louise Children’s Hospice in Stoke-on-Trent, which provides children’s and young people’s hospice services across Staffordshire and south-east Cheshire. It has written to me this week—given that time is short, I will pass the Minister a copy of the letter after the debate. It talks about the quality of palliative care as patchy:

“The way in which NHS CCGs and local authorities plan, fund and monitor children’s palliative care in hospitals, children’s hospices and the community represents”—as we have heard—“a postcode lottery. Staffordshire has no coherent plan and this is reflected in the poor financial support the Hospice receives from local commissioners. Donna Louise receives 8.9% of its income from the NHS.”

The hospice calls on the Government and NHS England “to consider appropriate mechanisms to bridge the children’s palliative care accountability gap.”

I want to spend most of my speech talking about an issue that I know is uncomfortable for some people to hear about. For that reason, I am delighted that you are in the Chair, Ms Dorries, because you have spoken about this issue on a number of occasions. Many families face a difficult decision when a child in the womb is diagnosed with a life-limiting or life-threatening condition. This is not a small issue: in 2017 there were a total of 3,314 ground E abortions on the grounds that the child was diagnosed with a substantial risk that, if born, they would suffer from physical or mental abnormalities, such as being seriously handicapped. Parents have to make really agonising decisions.

A few years ago, I held an inquiry in this place on the difficult situations that parents face when their child is diagnosed in this way and they have to consider an abortion. We took evidence from dozens of witnesses. Some had come under huge pressure to have an abortion, and the support they were given to consider keeping their baby was very limited. Many told us that they were steered towards an abortion, and they felt like the medical profession was irritated by them. Many felt like they were given no information on the support they might get; often the best information they got was through contacting charities, which could put them in touch with parents who were bringing up children—often very successfully. Those children brought great joy to their families, but the medical professionals did not give the families the information they needed to make a decision that was right for them. Some told us that all they received was a leaflet telling them how to have an abortion. The mothers who had kept their children, even if it was for a very short time, felt like they could grieve and care for their children in a way they had not been able to do otherwise. One mother had to have an abortion with her first baby and then decided she would keep the second, even though she knew the condition was life-limiting. She felt like there was a much better outcome for her and her family’s going through the grieving process.

The inquiry made a series of recommendations—I will pass a copy to the Minister because time is very short. I hope she will consider them and respond to me. Many people generally find this issue a very difficult one to address, as do—I am sorry to say—Ministers. Many of the recommendations in that report, which was published a few years ago, are still valid today. We recommended that guidelines for the medical profession should include training for obstetricians, foetal medicine specialists and midwives on the practical realities of the lives of children who have such conditions, so that they can better advise parents and give them better information when they make this difficult decision. One parent summarised what many others reported:

“Guidelines and standards need to be set in place”

so that all hospitals can meet a certain standard. Can the Minister assure me that she will look at our report and perhaps produce guidance to ensure that all mothers feel like they can make a genuinely informed decision
when they are carrying a baby with a life-limiting condition? Does she agree that we ought to provide much better information, so that parents in such circumstances can make an informed choice?

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): I am afraid that I will now have to put a formal time limit of four minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

10.6 am

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate. Given that we are reduced to four minutes each, I will ensure that I keep to that.

Like other hon. Members, I want to bring attention to two outstanding children’s hospices that serve my constituency: Chesnut Tree House and Demelza. They are not based in Eastbourne, but they do a considerable amount for many of my constituents and their children. Both are hospices and also deliver outreach services to very poorly children at home. I want to put that on record, as they do outstanding work.

I know the Minister is getting a long shopping list, so I will keep my requests fairly simple. I want to focus on two areas, both of which I am confident the Department can respond to fairly swiftly. First, NHS England states that its end-of-life care programme for children and young adults is managed through a cross-system governance board. That makes sense. It includes a lot of the key providers, such as the Department of Health and Social Care, clinical commissioning groups, NHS England and others. However, I discovered that there is no representation on that cross-system governance board of the children’s palliative care sector—the charities and groups that represent families and children and really know their stuff. I urge the Minister to look at that again.

The other serious issue—I am sure the Minister is aware of it, and I would welcome information from her on what is being done to respond—is that, according to the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, there are only 14 children’s palliative care consultants across the UK. I am sure the Minister would agree that that is completely inadequate. Perhaps the Minister can let me know—either at the end of this debate or in a letter—what plans NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care have to work with the Royal College to increase that number. Fourteen is clearly inadequate.

Let me end with a constituent’s issue that brings home the issue of long-term conditions and the end of children’s lives. This subject is incredibly important—we are talking about 45,000 youngsters—and I want to bring it down to earth and make it real. I am working with a constituent couple, Mr and Mrs Spence, and their teenage daughter Connie, who I have known for well over 10 years. She is now 16 or 17 and still has—obviously—a progressive, life-threatening condition. She is an amazing girl. Her parents have done fantastic work in looking after Connie and working with Demelza, giving her a good life.

Recently, Mr and Mrs Spence’s CCG told them that they would be allowed only three nappies a day. Without going into too much detail, we all understand that a very disabled 17-year-old girl—or any of us in her situation—would usually use six or seven nappies a day. They have been told that she can have only three. That is completely unacceptable, highly inappropriate and just wrong. The CCG pleads costs, as does the local trust. I will be writing to the Minister with details and hope that she will support me by making representations to the CCG to stop that completely inappropriate cut.

10.10 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Dorries. I commend my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for securing the debate. As one might expect, I wish to offer a few examples from Scotland, where I believe that we have a good story to tell, although we still have so much more to do. In the context of Scotland, it is important to make the distinction that funding for children’s palliative care is given parity of esteem with adult care. That is a point that I have made before to the Minister down south.

I know from my good relationship with Children’s Hospices Across Scotland, known as CHAS, that it is one of Scotland’s most well-known and best-loved charities. That is why it was right that in 2016, the SNP Scottish Government announced that they were committing £30 million in funding to CHAS, commencing in the financial year of 2017-18. That funding provides half of the agreed funding costs of running CHAS; that is very important. Not long after I was elected, my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and I had the honour of visiting Robin House in Balloch, where I saw at first hand the absolutely amazing work done by CHAS to provide compassionate care for children with a life-shortening condition.

At this juncture, I pay tribute to my good friend and colleague, Alex Neil MSP, a former Health Secretary in the Scottish Government, who drove that vital funding boost for the sector. His backing for research, in particular, was immeasurable. We know from experience that engaging comprehensively with the issue through research is an absolute necessity to determine the needs of those with life-limiting and life-shortening conditions.

I am conscious that other hon. Members wish to contribute to the debate and, in particular, raise issues through the prism of English funding, so I will make a couple of brief points before I conclude. First, it felt as though we were making a lot of progress on the baby benefit bar but I am not sure how far we have got. I would therefore welcome an update on that from the Minister.

Secondly, on the issue of workforce, having spent last night participating in debate on Second Reading of the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, I am concerned that there are far too few professionals with the skills, knowledge and experience required to provide children’s palliative care in hospitals and children’s hospices. Can the Minister outline what strategies the Government are pursuing to meet workforce challenges in future? That is a major issue.

Thirdly, on the difficult issue of when a child finally passes away, I am glad that my own Government, in Scotland, announced last year that they were taking action to ensure that all burial fees for children are abolished. When I was first elected to Parliament, the
32 local authorities in Scotland had different policies and charges for burial fees—it was very much a postcode lottery, so I welcome that change. I am concerned, however, that we need to do more to support families when their child eventually passes away. I absolutely welcome the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018, which was piloted through this place by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), but I remain disappointed that the scope of the Bill was so narrowly defined. I hope that we will have the opportunity to go back and widen it in the future.

In summary, there is plenty of work for us to do and get on with to support children with life-limiting conditions, as well as their families. We look to the Minister to take forward the consensual and strong cross-party support we have heard about today and deliver a better standard of research, funding and care for vulnerable children and their families. Again, I thank my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford, for securing this important debate. I hope that we can make progress going forward.

10.14 am

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing it.

Over 40,000 children and young people in England have a life-limiting or life-threatening condition, so we must not underestimate or undervalue the support that both the NHS and charity care sectors provide to both patients and their families. I am proud to represent the seat where the purpose-built hospice movement has some of its origins, with the foundation of St Christopher’s Hospice by the late Dame Cicely Saunders. South London is also home to the renowned Demelza specialist children’s hospice. Demelza was started more than 20 years ago and, in that time, it has grown to include two hospices and a community scheme in East Sussex, to which the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) referred.

Demelza’s hospice in Eltham, which opened in 2009, serves the boroughs of Bexley, Bromley, Croydon, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark. It is a specially designed hospice that provides first-rate care to the children who use it, while also supporting their families. I recently met the chief executive of Demelza children’s hospices, and I appreciate the lengths that he and his colleagues in the voluntary sector go to to make sure that the whole family is cared for. Their service is about a lot more than just the child and the medical and palliative side of care. Not only do charities like Demelza ease pressure on the NHS, but by providing support, advice and respite for the whole family, the assistance that they provide is invaluable. Having a child with a life-limiting condition can cause unimaginable strain on a family, and the smallest gestures have a big impact during those difficult times.

I follow the work of the all-party parliamentary group for children who need palliative care and I pay tribute to it. The APPG, alongside Together for Short Lives, recently published a report into end-of-life care for children. Worryingly, the report concluded that children who need palliative care are often subject to a postcode lottery of patchy service. The recent NHS long-term plan acknowledges that for far too long, funding for children’s palliative and end-of-life care through the children’s hospice grant has not kept pace with growth in clinical care costs or inflation. I welcome the plan’s pledge to boost funding for children’s hospices by up to £25 million a year by 2023-24, but the sector still has many funding requirements that need to be addressed if the hospices are to continue delivering such world-class care.

In October, I spoke in the Westminster Hall debate on hospice funding and the NHS pay award, and I mentioned that without additional Government support, local children’s hospices could face difficult choices about reducing services. The additional estimated cost to staffing budgets of matching the pay award for the NHS, which hospice staff rightly deserve, would be £200,000 every year. I hope that the additional funding will go some way to allay the fears of local hospices, but we cannot assume that the funding pledged will still be adequate in five years’ time.

We have much to be proud of in our care sectors, but there is still a great deal more to do. The funding commitments are welcome but are not a one-fix solution to the many issues faced by children with life-limiting conditions and their families. I hope that the continued hard work of the hospice workers who run Demelza and other hospices across the country can continue to bring care and compassion to families at the most difficult times, and that they will have the funds and resources to do so.

10.18 am

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): I am delighted that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) secured this debate on an issue that is so important for so many children and families across the country. It goes to the very heart of the work done by the APPG for children who need palliative care, of which I am vice-chair, alongside the chair, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson).

Babies, children and young people with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions rely on a range of social care services provided by a variety of statutory and voluntary organisations such as short breaks, practical assistance at home, home adaptations and support to access travel and leisure activities. A good example of one such provider, which celebrated its 15th birthday this year, is St Oswald’s Hospice in Newcastle. It provides residential short breaks and care to babies, children and young adults. Up to six children and young adults can stay at St Oswald’s at any one time, in a beautiful, relaxed, home-from-home environment. Indeed, one mother said about the hospice:

“Having respite at St Oswald’s for a couple of nights a month helped to give me a break. While I was doing all the medical care for my son, I couldn’t be a mum. Being at St Oswald’s gave me time to step back and just enjoy playing with him and having fun.”

Seriously ill children and their families across the country need short breaks and the respite provided by skilled, highly trusted people who can meet the child’s often complex health needs. It might only be for a few hours, or overnight for a few days at a time, but those short breaks are vital to help parents and siblings manage the immense stress and 24/7 pressure that a child with a life-limiting condition can bring. The evidence suggests that such respite care helps to support children and their family’s physical and mental health, and mitigates the risk of parental relationships breaking down.
Local authorities of course have a legal duty to provide short breaks for disabled children and their families, to be planned and funded jointly by local councils and the NHS. A Government-commissioned review of funding arrangements for palliative care made it clear in 2011 that that duty must include respite care for the carers and families of children requiring palliative care. Despite that, however, the charity Together for Short Lives found that too many CCGs and local authorities in England fail to plan and fund short breaks. More than one in five local authorities do not commission short breaks for children with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions, despite having a legal duty to do so, although 84% of CCGs reported that they commission short breaks for children who need palliative care.

Furthermore, the Disabled Children’s Partnership, of which Together for Short Lives is a member, has gathered increasing evidence of cuts to services for disabled children. Is it any wonder that that is taking place? The Local Government Association estimated that children’s services face a £3.1 billion funding gap by 2025, just to maintain existing levels of service. Given such findings, I shall be grateful if the Minister confirms in her response how she holds sustainability and transformation partnerships, integrated care systems, CCGs and local authorities to account for the way in which they plan and fund short breaks.

I am also keen to highlight the importance of the provision of short breaks to all families who receive them, not only those families with children who need palliative care, but those with disabled children whose conditions can be life-limiting as well. I was able to witness that on Friday, when I visited the excellent Alan Shearer Centre in Lemington in my constituency. It provides specialist respite services in a specially adapted environment. One of the key concerns expressed to me at the centre was about how the level of respite care support that disabled children and their families receive can be halved when a person’s condition has not changed at all—the only thing that has changed is their age. Many families described that as feeling as if the rug has been pulled from under their feet.

I also want to highlight the work of the Rainbow Trust, which provides vital support at home for so many families, including in Newcastle. Will it be possible for the recently announced funding of £25 million for palliative and end-of-life care to be used to provide that emotional and life-affirming support for such families? Children with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions face enough challenges without the added stress of not having the support they need.

I call those tactics heartless. In effect, Biogen’s approach is to hold a baby’s life in its hands and ask a still grieving family to use their child to get the deal that the company wants with NICE. Shakil and his family have suffered so much, and Maryam needs Spinraza as soon as possible. I will not let the Government or NICE off the hook on this one, and I would like to meet the Department. Biogen, however, needs to step up now to offer a way forward for Maryam—she cannot wait. Biogen, do the decent thing!

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. He and I are both members of the all-party group for muscular dystrophy, so I know that his commitment to the issues being discussed this morning is genuine.

Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), I will talk about Spinraza, because nothing is more fundamental for anyone with a life-limiting or life-threatening condition, or their families,
than to have access to treatment that will give the chance of a better quality of life and, possibly, some chance of longevity.

As my hon. Friend said, one of the rare conditions that until the last few years has had no proven treatment is SMA. There are four types, and the most severe is type 1. Infants diagnosed with that have a life expectancy of no more than two years. The condition affects the lower motor neurones in the spinal cord, leading to loss of mobility and eventually of the ability to breathe and swallow.

The drug Spinraza, which was developed and marketed by the pharmaceutical company Biogen, is the only treatment that has proved successful for children with SMA. Spinraza was granted a marketing authorisation by the European Medicines Agency more than 18 months ago. It is available in 24 European countries including Scotland, as has been said, but not in other parts of the UK.

The APPG, which I chair, has supported the work of our excellent secretariat organisation, Muscular Dystrophy UK, and other groups to press for Spinraza to be approved by NICE. Many MPs across the House with constituents who suffer from SMA feel the frustration of families waiting for Spinraza to be approved. So far, however, progress has been slow. That is largely due to the fact that Spinraza has been assessed by NICE under the single technology appraisal, or STA, route, which is not appropriate for such a rare condition. That route is normally used for more common conditions, and it is now a year since the assessment began. Also, in August, when NICE published its initial decision on access to the drug, it did not recommend Spinraza for use on the NHS. That was a bitter blow for all the families, including the family of young Sam McKie from North Tyneside, who has the condition.

Biogen opened an expanded access programme globally in 2016, as an interim solution for patients with infantile-onset SMA. In the UK, the programme was extended to support continued access for those patients until NICE completed its appraisal. To date, more than 80 eligible children in the UK have received the drug free of charge. Under the timeframes provided by NICE, the final appraisal document was scheduled for last November; therefore, disappointingly, Biogen closed its access to the EAP for new patients.

Since August, the APPG has been active in pressing NICE. NHS England and Ministers to be flexible in finding a way forward, and I raised the issue at Prime Minister’s questions in September. There is an impasse, because NICE continues to require that Spinraza should be cost-effective through the STA route, but Biogen has pointed out that, given the smaller patient population in rare diseases, it is inappropriate to expect treatments to achieve the same cost-effectiveness thresholds as medicines in disease areas that have much larger patient populations.

10.30 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I thank everyone who has taken part in this extremely important debate. It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), who raised the issue of Spinraza, and the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who spoke about her constituent Maryam and about why this issue must be taken forward by the UK Government. I hope the Minister will agree with her.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate and for speaking so passionately. Week in, week out in the House of Commons he champions the most vulnerable in our society. He gave a poignant speech to support those with life-threatening conditions. By securing this debate, he has let us all speak about the important issues raised by those conditions and the charities that do such excellent work, including Together for Short Lives, the Rainbow Trust, the Children’s Hospices Across Scotland at Robin House and CLIC Sargent, to name just a few. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee; I was extremely pleased to be part of the cross-party group that requested the debate. I have chaired the all-party parliamentary group for disability since 2015; we are working extremely hard on these issues, and I thank everyone involved in it.

I should like to mention my constituent Gary Butterworth of Westwood Golf Club, who, as well as playing lots of golf, has taken the time to raise more than £20,000 for Children’s Hospices Across Scotland. Every year I support the efforts of the club and Gary to fundraise; we will visit Robin House together later this year.

I also thank my constituent Lisa Quarell, who has worked so hard over the past year not only to look after her six-year-old son Cole, who has experienced repeated epileptic seizures and whose health has deteriorated dramatically, but to try to access medicinal cannabis since the Home Secretary took up that issue. I hope the Minister will look at those issues very carefully, because the care pathways for families are not adequate. Lisa has battled day in, day out just to access the Home Secretary’s recommendations. Those families do not have the energy, in addition to caring for their children, to battle the system.

A number of issues have been raised in the debate. I want to stress the care and emotional and practical support that needs to be put in place for siblings. When a young child has a life-threatening or life-limiting condition, siblings often feel, not ignored, but not the focal point of the family’s daily life. There should be support for the whole family unit, and particularly for siblings. We heard about the need for family-friendly working policies and psychological support. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, having worked as a psychologist.

Some remarkable speeches were made; I thank the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who does such fantastic work in the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, for raising the important issue of personal budget plans. Families should not have to think about finances at such a grave time in their lives. If I was wearing a hat, I would take it off to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for her excellent work in Parliament to strengthen families, provide support and raise issues that many find extremely difficult to broach. I hope the Minister looks very carefully at the hon. Lady’s recommendations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) outlined the Scottish Government’s developments and funding for CHAS; I thank him for his work on...
those issues. The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) spoke so poignantly that I was almost in tears while listening to her talk about the end of the world for individuals and their families. We must take that on board. I am sure the Minister heard those words clearly.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) paid tribute to all his local hospices and spoke about the important issue of the number of consultants available. The Minister should look at that issue closely and meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss it. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) spoke about the fantastic work of the specialist hospices in her constituency, and the need for funding to preserve and enhance that work. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for speaking about the importance of respite, which too often is forgotten about. Respite is not a dirty word; it is not about respite from your child but with your child, to enjoy them, to play with them and to do the natural things that families do.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister. Can she confirm that total NHS funding for children’s palliative care will not fall as a result of the long-term plan, and that children’s hospices will not receive less funding? Will she clarify whether the increase in funding from £11 million to £25 million is intended to be open to providers of emotional and practical support, alongside the hospices? If not, what will be provided to ensure that we have that emotional and practical support? What steps will the Minister take to encourage clinical commissioning groups and local authorities to increase commissioning for the sibling support that I mentioned?

10.37 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing a debate on this very important subject. I pay tribute to all the dedicated people in hospices, in the community and in hospitals who support families with a seriously ill child. I also thank organisations such as Together for Short Lives, CLIC Sargent and the Rainbow Trust, which do excellent work to provide support.

Hon. Members across the House have made powerful speeches on a very emotional subject. I am grateful to them all. I can think of few things in life worse than for a parent to hear that their child is so seriously ill that they cannot expect to live a full life, or to live with the knowledge that their child will never grow into adulthood, and will die before them. That must be absolutely devastating and is against the natural order of things. The pain is almost unimaginable. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for sharing her moving story and for the work she does to support other parents to get through very difficult times.

In the United Kingdom, 49,000 babies, children and young people, and their families, are coping with life-threatening and life-limiting conditions. In recent years, the Government have made various commitments to deliver support for appropriate end-of-life care that recognises the difference between the end-of-life care needs of children and those of adults. The needs of children and young people in that situation are invariably more complex and can be longer term. The children’s charity CLIC Sargent reports that four out of five children survive cancer for five years or more. In fact, many children with life-limiting conditions live into adulthood. It is clear that although they may not need end of life care, they and their families usually need access to expert support and palliative care in a children’s hospice, at home or in a community setting.

As children with life-threatening and life-limiting conditions increasingly live into adulthood, it is even more important than ever that they are able to express their care preferences and that the continuity and co-ordination of their care is assured. In 2016, the Government committed to offering children and their parents the right to be involved in choosing and accessing the most appropriate care. NICE guidelines published in December 2016 stated that local commissioners and providers should prioritise advance care planning and agree in partnership, in a responsive and flexible fashion, the place and delivery of that care.

However, the reality is a postcode lottery. We heard many good examples of that. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) spoke movingly about the plight of Maryam and the fact that children in England still do not have access to what is effectively a life-saving and life-enabling drug. I hope the Minister listened very carefully to that. My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) raised similar concerns about what children and their families suffer.

Shockingly, 46% of CCGs are failing to implement the Government’s end of life care commitments. I note that when Ministers are questioned on the provision of health and social care services for disabled children, their answer invariably includes the words, “The commissioning of health and social care services is the responsibility of clinical commissioning groups and local authorities respectively.” That is all very well, but agreed standards are not being implemented.

I know the Minister cares about this issue, but there is a worrying lack of accountability. Will she outline what steps the Government will take to bridge the accountability gap? Will she clarify who is responsible for commissioning palliative care and who is responsible for commissioning respite breaks for families? Respite breaks provide essential relief for the parents and siblings of children with severe life-threatening and life-limiting conditions; they are often the difference between coping and not coping. Does she agree there is a desperate need for a review of all commissioning of palliative care and support services, and that the Government need to develop an overarching strategy to bring an end to the postcode lottery that leaves so many families struggling to access vital services?

An important part of the support available is provided by children’s hospices. We have heard many examples of those; the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and others talked about excellent hospice care. In the main, hospices are charitable organisations that rely for the majority of their funding on donations and fundraising in the local community. The current economic climate makes it more difficult for hospices to raise the requisite funding; at the same time, the proportion of funding provided by the NHS is falling. Again, there is no consistency or strategic oversight of the amounts that CCGs and local authorities contribute.
**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions the fundraising that is done by some excellent organisations and lots of individuals, some of whom we have heard about. Does she agree that the Government should undertake to fund increased pension contributions for staff working in hospitals, instead of giving with one hand and taking with the other?

**Julie Cooper:** I totally agree, and I will come to that point in a moment.

The average NHS contribution to children’s hospices is only 9%. Recent additional costs relating to the implementation of the NHS staff pay award and extra pension costs have pushed many hospices into a dire financial position, with closure a real possibility. Where hospices are forced to close, the NHS is left to fund the entire cost of health and social care for those children and young people.

In that context, the announcement by NHS England in December of £25 million of extra funding for children’s hospices was extremely welcome. However, children’s hospices do not know how to access that extra funding. Derian House Children’s Hospice in Chorley, which currently supports 12 families from my constituency, told me this week that there is no clarity about how that newly committed funding can be accessed. As many Members mentioned, since the publication of the NHS 10-year plan there has been confusion about what exactly has been promised.

The Minister will be aware that the 10-year plan promises that, over the next five years, “NHS England will increase its contribution by match-funding clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) who commit to increase their investment in local children’s palliative and end of life care services including children’s hospices.”

Does she agree that that is confusing, and will she clarify the following points? Will the £25 million promised in December be only for children’s hospices or for a wider group of children’s palliative care services? Can she guarantee that, as a result of the long-term plan, the £11 million children’s hospice grant will be protected and increased to reflect the growing demand and complexity of care provided by those lifeline services? The total spend on children’s palliative care in hospices, hospitals and the community currently exceeds £25 million, so the promised funding could be viewed—I am sure this is unintentional—as a cap on NHS spending on children’s palliative care. In the light of that, can she reassure me that the NHS will indeed provide additional funding for children’s hospices?

I turn briefly to the financial pressures that parents of children with seriously ill children often experience. The 2018 “Counting the cost” survey of families who provide long-term care for a disabled child found that many experienced huge financial difficulties. A third of all families surveyed said they had additional costs of more than £300 each month. Some 46% of families had been threatened with court action for non-payment of bills. That is hardly surprising given that 87% of the families surveyed were unable to work because of their caring commitments.

CLIC Sargent has highlighted that children suffering with cancer often have to travel longer distances than adult patients for regular treatments, placing a significant additional financial burden on parents already coping with so much. Will the Minister commit to introducing a package of financial support that includes a children and young people’s cancer travel fund for parents who care for children with life-threatening diseases? Will she also spare a thought for bereaved parents and accelerate the introduction of the children’s funeral fund that so many Members have requested?

In conclusion, I ask that the Minister answers the specific points that I and other hon. Members have raised, and commits to implementing a comprehensive strategy that provides a consistent standard of joined-up, adequately funded children’s palliative care that has full parity with adult care.

**Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair):** Minister, will you leave one minute at the end for Mr Shannon to wind up?

10.46 am

**The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage):** Of course, Ms Dorries. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) for raising the issue of the life-saving drug that they are keen to get hold of for their constituents. I will of course commit to looking at that with the Secretary of State, but I share the concern of the hon. Member for West Ham that children should never be used as pawns in communications between drug companies and Government organisations.

**Lyn Brown:** May I just press the Minister to agree to the urgent meeting I requested?

**Caroline Dinenage:** Absolutely. The meeting probably would not be with me, because the issue does not fall under my portfolio, but it is really important that the hon. Lady meets the relevant Minister.

The debate has been very broad, and a lot of questions were asked. I will attempt to answer as many as I can, but I commit to writing to hon. Members with all the answers they asked for if I miss any out. Whenever we discuss this issue, we must keep at the back of our minds the powerful point made by the hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), despite her throat issues, that at a time of their lives when they are dealing with unimaginable stress and grief, parents should not have to fight for what they need to best care for their children.

The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) painted a picture of how the world ends when you lose a child. I cannot even begin to imagine that, but it must feel the same to be told that your child may die at a young age. That must, quite simply, be devastating. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, almost 40,000 children and young people aged 19 or under in England live with a life-limiting condition and may need palliative care. Of those, around 1,000 die every year.

As outlined in the NHS long-term plan, we know that children’s palliative and end of life care have not kept pace with the growth in clinical care costs or with inflation. NHS England’s hospice grant programme
provides £11 million a year for children’s hospices, which are incredibly valuable. I have spoken before—probably in this room—about my great passion for children’s hospices. That comes from my mum who helped raise money to build Naomi House children’s hospice just outside Winchester, and throughout my twenties she made the whole family partake in a range of humiliating fundraising exercises to raise money for that. I went to visit Naomi House again last year, many years later, and I saw at first hand the incredible, valuable services that it offers, not just for end of life care, but because of its respite and outreach work, which is a lifeline for so many families.

Hon. Members will know the invaluable services offered by children’s hospices, and I was pleased that in the long-term plan additional funding has been made available each year for children’s palliative and end of life care services. I understand the confusion about the different amounts that have been mentioned and issues around that, and Department officials are currently working with NHS England to clarify those numbers and what they mean. I am clear that funding for children’s hospices is vital. We must ensure they get the money they need, and that money must increase from its current levels.

As the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, there is regional variation in how palliative care is delivered. I know that such care is exceptional in some parts of the country, and many staff up and down the country go above and beyond to ensure that experiences for children with life-limiting conditions, and those at the end of their life, are as good as they can be. We know, however, that there are areas where we need to do considerably more, and NHS England is firmly focused on providing support and challenge to achieve that. Choice at the end of life is a centrepiece of the Government’s drive to improve end of life care, and for choice to be meaningful it needs to be personalised and matched by healthcare services that respond in an effective way that places patients, families and carers at the heart of decision making. We know when we achieve that that we have got it right, but also that we have a long way to go. I pay tribute to the all-party group for children who need palliative care, and charities such as Together for Short Lives, and the work they are doing to take that crusade forward.

Catherine McKinnell: I appreciate the commitment made by the Minister that her officials will clarify those figures. Will she also commit to ensuring that children’s hospices do not receive less money as a result of the long-term plan? Can she make that reassuring commitment to everybody watching the debate today?

Caroline Dinenage: I know that we are planning to meet next month to discuss this issue in more detail, but my understanding from the announcement in the long-term plan is that there will be an increase in funding for children’s hospices. I would not support a move towards anything other than that, so we are certainly in agreement about the value that children’s hospices offer up and down our country.

In July 2016, “Our commitment to you for end of life care” set out what everyone should expect from care at the end of life, and the actions being taken to make high-quality personalised care a reality for all. NHS England is responsible for delivering that commitment in partnership with key stakeholders through its national end of life care programme board. The hon. Member for Strangford mentioned ensuring that sustainability and transformation partnerships and integrated care systems deliver care in a way that supports their local population. NHS England is already working with Public Health England and the Care Quality Commission to provide bespoke end of life care data and support packs to STP and ICS areas, to help plan for and improve end of life services.

NHS England is developing a new indicator for clinical commissioning groups to measure deaths in hospital after three or more emergency admissions in the final 90 days of life. That sounds like a technical piece of data to collect, but such vital information will help us to understand exactly what care is being delivered, and ensure that we spread best practice and identify areas for improvement.

The hon. Gentleman rightly highlighted the crucial role that leadership and accountability play in commissioning those vital services, and NHS England has and is seeking to improve support for commissioners when funding and delivering children’s end of life care. In April 2017 it made available a new specialist palliative care currency—one for adults and one for children—to support local areas in planning and delivering services, including hospice services. The currency can help local services better understand complexity of care and the investment needed to deliver it. It can be difficult for some commissioners to develop suitable models to meet children’s needs, given that in some geographical areas relatively small numbers are involved. That is why NHS England has established an expert group, which includes Together for Short Lives, to bring together knowledge and expertise in children’s end of life care, consider developing models that are suitable for that incredibly vulnerable group of patients, and set up pilot models of care that will be implemented later this year.

A number of hon. Members mentioned short break services, and access to respite and short breaks is fundamental for many families and carers. Local authorities have a legal duty to commission short breaks, and although the NHS’s role is not statutory but a matter for local commissioners, it may also provide clinical support. Having the reassurance of clinical oversight can often mean the difference between carers taking those much-needed breaks and feeling unable to do so, and it is important that such work is collaborative. A recent report from Together for Short Lives found that 84% of clinical commissioning groups said that they commission short breaks for children who need palliative care—an increase from 77% in 2018. We want to ensure that 100% of clinical commissioning groups make such a contribution so that carers have access to the breaks they need. NHS England provides bespoke data and commissioning support to STP and ICS areas to enable them to plan and deliver effective services, such as short breaks, for children and young people.

Access to and quality of palliative and end of life care goes beyond funding for hospices, and through the long-term plan we are accelerating the roll-out of personal health budgets to give people greater control and choice. We want 200,000 people to benefit from a personal health budget by 2023-24, and that will include things
such as provision of bespoke wheelchairs and community-based packages for personal and domestic support. NHS England is expanding the offer of mental health services to people receiving social care support and those receiving specialist or end of life care.

Julie Cooper: Does the Minister agree that the 49,000 babies, children and young people who have been diagnosed with life-threatening or life-limiting conditions would all benefit from a personal finance plan?

Caroline Dinenage: That is right. The system has to be rolled out carefully because we must get it 100% right. It is a jointly funded and collaborative system, but at the end of 2018 it covered 32,000 people, and by 2023-24 it will cover 200,000 people. That shows enormous progress and commitment, and it will give those who want it more choice and control over what kind of care and support they need to meet their needs.

NHS England is developing a refreshed end of life care core skills education and training framework to standardise training, and the NHS now employs more staff than at any other time in its history. The data does not identify nursing specialities, such as palliative care, but the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) may be interested to know that 648 full-time equivalent doctors are working in palliative medicine, which is 202 more than in May 2010—an increase of 45.2%. NHS England’s long-term plan sets out how it will work with patients, families, local authorities and voluntary sector partners to personalise and improve end of life care.

I will write to the hon. Member for Strangford about NHS pensions and hospices. I was going to mention “Agenda for Change”, but I do not have much time and I wish to leave him time to conclude the debate. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this debate. We know there is more to be done to meet our ambition to reduce variation at the end of life and ensure proper support for children with life-limiting conditions and their families.

10.59 am

Jim Shannon: I thank you, Ms Dorries, for enabling all Members to speak today, and I thank the 17 right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken for their personal and incredible contributions, which came from every region of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Their constituents should be proud of their elected representatives who made such significant contributions to the debate. I thank the Minister for her compassionate and understanding response, and for her obvious interest in and commitment to improving the situation. The meetings that she will hold will be an indication of how that goes. Today this House shone a light on an issue that has united us. Is it too much to hope that before the day is out, we may unite on other things as well?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered support for children with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions and their families.

11 am

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effectiveness of short prison sentences.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on boxing and a steward of the British Boxing Board of Control.

I have called this debate because I was heartened by the Minister’s recent statement that he is seriously considering abolishing short-term prison sentences. Considering the many reports in the news about the apparent decline of prisons across the country—perhaps most notably HM Prison Bedford—this debate could not have come at a better time. It is my hope that the debate will serve as the beginning of a conversation with the Government, wider society, charities and other organisations that inspires confidence in our criminal justice system and brings about effective, fair punishment in the future.

According to Dr Robert Jones at the Wales Governance Centre, Wales has the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe. As of last Friday, there were more than 82,400 people serving sentences in prisons across England and Wales, 95% of them male. The current prison capacity of England and Wales is estimated to be around 85,000, which means many prisons are suffering from severe overcrowding and a massive strain on resources. This overcrowding leads to increased risk of inmate violence, and leaves resources and staff thinly stretched across the prison, which can heavily impact on the success of rehabilitating inmates.

It is clear that things have to change. I believe that there are alternatives available to the Government. If we were to see more investment in community services and rehabilitative treatment programmes, which can address an offender’s criminogenic needs, we would see a reduction in the prison population and rates of reoffending. I am aware that the Minister expressed an interest in abolishing sentences of only three months, but I believe that there is a case to extend this to sentences of up to six months. All of the evidence stacks up to show that shorter sentences do not work.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making some good points about overcrowding and the state of the prison estate. When looking at short sentences, the key issue for me is whether they achieve the rehabilitation of prisoners; my judgment is that they do not. Would he agree?

Chris Evans: The hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point, which I will elaborate on later. There are numerous examples of people in the system with substance abuse issues, who cannot get into substance abuse rehabilitation or overcome their problem, who then find themselves outside, and get back into the system. I will develop this argument more as I go on and I will be happy to take another intervention, if the hon. Gentleman so wishes.
To me, short sentences do not help to reduce reoffending and they can cause unnecessary disruption to the lives of those who could have been dealt with in ways that have seen better results.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about the impact on people’s lives. A recent report published by the Prison Reform Trust showed that 17,000 children in England and Wales are affected by maternal imprisonment each year. One in four women are sentenced to less than one month. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is completely unsustainable for women and their children?

Chris Evans: In the case of non-violent crimes, especially those committed by women, there is a real argument to make about that. I cannot quote the figures off the top of my head, but I understand that a large number of women who are locked up have been victims of domestic violence. The courts need to accept that and think about it when they are sentencing women in the future. As I said, 95% of the prison population is male. How many of the 5% who are women have been convicted of non-violent crimes and sentenced to less than one month? Many women are in nurturing and caring roles, with children and also with elderly parents, and that would cause severe disruption as well.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is critical to develop a robust and credible system of community sentences, so that my constituents can feel satisfied that when people are punished by the court they truly receive something that is inconvenient, rehabilitative and credible?

Chris Evans: The hon. Gentleman hits the nail on the head. This is all about building confidence in community rehabilitation sentencing. Somebody said to me earlier in the week that if somebody’s house gets burgled, they want to feel that people have been punished. However, community sentencing is seen as the soft option. As this debate goes on over the next few months, we have to be talking about building confidence in those sentences—the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right.

The revolving doors agency’s campaign, which is called #shortsighted, backs the sentiment that ending short sentences can reduce cost and be resource effective. It is calling on the Government to bring an end to short sentences and opt for community-based sentences instead.

In England and Wales we are too quick to send people to prison for petty and often persistent crimes. I understand that Governments of all shades are often influenced by the media, which likes the idea of “lock them up”. The fact that many people who have received a short sentence often reoffend and commit similar crimes shows that short-term sentences are ineffective in reducing recidivism. Government statistics from 2018 show that 63% of those who had sentences of less than 12 months went on to reoffend within a year. It is clear that short prison sentences do not provide an apt amount of time to stage an intervention and address the needs of an offender, particularly if that offender is also experiencing ongoing problems with drug and alcohol use or other mental health issues.

On the other side of the coin, those who have committed crimes of animal cruelty face a maximum of six months’ imprisonment in Wales. I understand that the Government in England have committed to increase that to five years, an extension which I believe should be applied to all parts of the UK. Six months hardly provides enough time for an intervention in such criminal behaviour, and animal cruelty should not be treated in the same manner as petty crimes. I support the continued campaign by Battersea Dogs & Cats Home to increase these sentences.

Last year, the revolving doors agency carried out research among voters of all parties in England and Wales, bearing in mind what I said about the media and “lock them up”. It found that an overwhelming 80% believe that those convicted of petty crimes, such as theft of daily essentials, should not be sent to prison. They also found that voters strongly back reducing the prison population and investing money in activities such as drug treatment programmes instead, with 74% thinking that offenders who have committed a petty crime and who have drug or alcohol addictions belong in treatment programmes, instead of prison. What is more, the majority of voters said that they would be more likely to vote for an MP who supported reducing prison populations and investing the savings into treatment programmes, with only 16% saying that they would be unlikely to do so.

Alex Chalk: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that we need to slay the myth that this country is somehow soft on locking people up? Across the United Kingdom over 90,000 people are locked up, whereas in France the figure is closer to 60,000 people. It is important that we set the record straight, and do so loud and clear.

Chris Evans: I absolutely agree. From the contributions that we have had so far, the tone of the debate makes me think that we are going to produce something that will inspire confidence. I welcome all the interventions we have had so far; it has been good. The hon. Gentleman is right. Coming from a small country like Wales, I find it amazing that we have the highest prison population in western Europe.

I have always been supportive of the UK’s prison system taking a rehabilitative approach with offenders, rather than a punitive one. Rehabilitation is proven in successfully reducing reoffending rates, far more than a punitive system does. All we need to do is to look to prison systems in countries such as Norway and Finland to see that rehabilitating and educating offenders massively reduces rates of crime, and to the US and Russia to see that punishment does not.

People being imprisoned in England and Wales are mostly being convicted of non-violent, petty crimes. Many of these offenders have other issues, such as alcohol, drugs or their mental health. Sending those people to prison for a few months will not help them, and nor will it help wider society. The Ministry of Justice has published research in the past which confirms the fact that offenders given short-term prison sentences were associated with significantly higher proven reoffending than those given a community order or suspended sentence.

To reduce reoffending by those with substance abuse or mental health issues, treatment programmes would be far more beneficial than imprisonment. For younger
offenders engaging in petty crime, perhaps educational workshops would be better. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on boxing I have been researching and learning about the benefits of sport and boxing in reducing and deterring criminal behaviour and keeping young people on the straight and narrow. It is definitely an avenue that the Government should consider exploring. However, despite a review from Rosie Meek about the benefits of sports, boxing and martial arts in prisons, the Government have yet to act on the recommendations. I want to ask the Minister whether I and a delegation from the all-party group could come to discuss her report with him.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a considered speech, and I wholeheartedly agree with it. We both represent working-class communities that believe in being tough on crime and its causes. Does he agree that the Government could do much more to support projects such as the Wildcard boxing academy in my community, which keeps young people in places such as St Helens out of the criminal justice system in the first place?

Chris Evans: When it comes to boxing there is evidence. I could cite a huge number of champions, from both sides of the Atlantic—some famous examples—who found themselves in trouble and used boxing to turn themselves around, because of the discipline that the sport taught them. The Government need to take those ideas on board, and provide support for boxing clubs, which tend to be at the bottom of the pile when money is handed out in community grants.

John Howell: Does the hon. Gentleman think there is a great contradiction in the health service engaging in social prescription, by encouraging people to engage in sports activities, while the Prison Service does not?

Chris Evans: Yes. The trend in the past 20 years has been that prevention is better than cure. The NHS is getting success in encouraging people suffering from obesity to go on to fitness and diet programmes. There is some success from that approach, and it could be transferred to the Prison Service. If people with energy have time on their hands, sport can fill it.

In research published last year by the Ministry of Justice it was found that reductions in reoffending were associated with the use of court orders such as community sentences rather than short custodial sentences. The effect was greater for people with a larger number of prior offences, younger offenders, and people with severe mental health problems. For those with prior offences who have already served a number of short stints in prison, imprisonment is clearly not a deterrent but more of an occupational hazard. It is interesting, therefore, that those offenders are less likely to reoffend when given community sentences.

Community sentences can be a win-win for all. Taxpayers’ money is saved, local communities and projects benefit and offenders learn skills and the value of giving back to society instead of taking from it. Not only do short sentences do nothing to rehabilitate an offender or reduce their risk of reoffending; sending people to prison for a few months unnecessarily adds to the overcrowding in prisons throughout the country. As I mentioned, England and Wales are reaching peak prison capacity and many prisons are heavily overcrowded. The overcrowding means even more strain on already pressured prison staff and resources; there are not enough of them as it is. That in turn has an impact on the success of inmate rehabilitation, levels of violence in prisons and access to illegal drugs, not to mention the wellbeing of prison staff.

That overcrowding could be prevented if courts did not instantly resort to sentencing offenders to short prison terms for non-violent petty crimes. In the year ending June 2018 almost 29,000 people entered prison to serve sentences of six months or less. That was 47% of all sentenced offenders entering prison during that time. According to Ministry of Justice prison performance statistics for 2017-18, in England and Wales the cost of keeping one person in prison for a year stood at £37,543. That works out at about £3,125 per month for one prisoner. The annual figure is more than Brits earn on average each year, and is almost as much as the cost of a place at an elite public school. Think of the amount of money we could save and invest elsewhere, if we did not imprison people on short sentences. It would also save money in the long run, as those who serve a community sentence or enter a rehabilitation programme are less likely to reoffend and to be imprisoned again in the future.

The money saved could be invested into the programmes and used to create more jobs and train more staff in the skills required to work in rehabilitation and treatment services, as well as being spent on other public services. With the looming threat of a no-deal Brexit and a shrinking economy, we need to be more efficient and effective with money and resources, and invest in and utilise more efficient and effective options.

It is not just the placement in prison for a few months that is costly. Short-term sentences can be hugely disruptive to people’s lives and lead them to be less reliant on public and social services than they were before entering prison. Resettling a previously imprisoned offender back into the community uses up a lot of time, money and resources. Short sentences can disrupt employment and housing situations, which can lead to more people applying for and relying on universal credit. There is a risk of people being left homeless, particularly if they are released on a Friday, as happened to more than 25,000 people in 2017-18. The public services that people rely upon release, such as access to benefits, medication, housing or other assistance, are closed over the weekend. That means there is a risk that they will not get their basic needs supplied and that they will sleep rough for at least three nights. Therefore they will be at increased risk of reoffending. From there the offender can fall into the cycle of offending and imprisonment, which racks up the costs in the long run.

I know that the Minister is committed to prison reform and reducing the levels of inmate violence and access to drugs, and that he recognises the virtue of rehabilitating and educating inmates. I commend him for that. I hope he would agree therefore that, if we truly want to protect the public and remove people from a life of crime, so that they become proactive citizens who make positive contributions to society, we must take heed of the research and the multitude of statistics showing that short prison sentences do not work. I
mentioned earlier the Revolving Doors Agency’s #shortsighted campaign, and I urge the Minister to take on board its recommendations. It calls on the Government to introduce a presumption against short custodial sentences of less than six months, much as the Scottish Government have done. That would allow for such sentences to be given only when no other appropriate option was available. In cases where short prison sentences were imposed for non-violent petty crimes, the courts would have to give a reason why they had opted for a custodial sentence over a community one. What is more, that approach would not remove the court’s discretion, and would allow courts to deal with more serious and violent offences appropriately. What is proposed is a presumption, not a ban on short prison sentences.

The fact that an offender does not go to prison does not mean that they are escaping justice or retribution. Such offenders will serve their time in another way, whether through curfews and tags or community service that benefits the wider community. Many of them face pressing personal issues, including substance abuse, homelessness or mental illness. I believe that they should be given the opportunity to escape the vicious cycle of criminal behaviour. They should have help alongside serving their community sentence, so that they can be rehabilitated and learn skills that can benefit their local economy and wider society.

We have to ask: do we truly want our streets to be safe, or do we want offenders to be punished and thrown into an expensive cycle of petty criminal behaviour and short-term imprisonment? If the answer is the former, the only way forward is to focus on how we can help those people change their lives for the better, rather than throwing them in prison and forgetting about them for several months. By allowing the latter to happen we will only contribute to the rising level of crime on the streets, and to overstretched prison services. I hope that the Minister can agree with me on that, and that he will pursue alternatives to short-term prison sentences.

As I said at the beginning of the debate, I look forward to engaging in a constructive and robust conversation. I do not expect to get all the answers today. However, I want a real opportunity to engage, over the next few months, in bringing about a justice conversation. I do not expect to get all the answers forward to engaging in a constructive and robust sentences.

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As I said at the beginning of the debate, I look forward to engaging in a constructive and robust conversation. I do not expect to get all the answers today. However, I want a real opportunity to engage, over the next few months, in bringing about a justice system that brings benefits and, above all, inspires the confidence of the whole community.

**Alex Chalk rose—**

**Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair):** You can only intervene on a 30-minute debate; I am afraid you cannot make a speech.

11.19 am

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) for his fantastic speech, which has really framed the problem we are dealing with today. I am happy to encourage interventions from my hon. Member; I am sorry to hear that we will not be hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who has an enormous amount to contribute to this debate.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): He can always intervene on you.

**Rory Stewart:** He can always intervene on me. I will first touch briefly on the issue of public protection, secondly try to take a concrete example from Bedford Prison about how short-term prison sentences actually work in reality, thirdly touch on the alternatives to prison and, finally, talk about the prison regime.

I begin with public protection. It is not a subject that can be approached with anything other than the greatest, profoundest degree of seriousness. In the end, almost the most fundamental duty of our Government is to protect the public, and in particular to protect the public against crime. Whatever we are talking about today, all parties across the House begin with a fundamental understanding that crime is wrong and that it can inflict unspeakable misery on a victim. We have only to think of recent events—victims of knife crime, innocent people smashed up in the streets, victims of burglary, victims of sexual offences—to see why we must begin with absolute horror at and abhorrence of crime.

In addressing this, we must combine our desire to punish people, quite rightly, for committing crimes, our desire to deter more people from committing crimes in the future, our desire to rehabilitate people and change their behaviour, our desire to protect the public, and our desire to pass on a strong message that we will not tolerate this misery being inflicted on the public. When we talk about this, it is important to stress that nobody, on either side of the House, is in any way questioning the horror that crime imposes on victims.

However, it is also important to look at the reality of what is happening in our prisons. On Thursday last week, I was in Bedford Prison, talking to a man. I asked, “How long have you been in for?” He said, “Three weeks.” I asked if it was his first time in Bedford Prison and he said, “No, I was here eight times last year.” I said, “How could you possibly have been in Bedford Prison eight times last year?” He showed me his arm; he was not wearing his shirt and he had tracks from his heroin addiction right the way up his arm. He said, “What happens is, I’m a heroin addict. I leave Bedford Prison after a few weeks, I don’t really know what to do with myself, I shoplift and I get put back in Bedford Prison again.” The question is, what purpose is being served by moving this man in and out of Bedford Prison eight times in a year?

**Alex Chalk:** To stop him shoplifting.

**Rory Stewart:** By all means, we can come back to that suggestion, but first I will go through some of the purposes that might be put forward. It was quite clear from my conversation with him that this was a man who had serious mental health issues, serious learning difficulties and a serious drug addiction. The first suggestion, made by the sotto voce intervention from my hon. Friend, is that perhaps the reason we have put him in prison is that when he is in prison he is not shoplifting. That is true, but we must remember that he is only in prison for three weeks. It is not a great protection of the public from his shoplifting if he is removed for three weeks and then popped back on to the streets again.

The second reason that people would suggest for his being put in prison is to deter him from committing an offence in the future. That is clearly not working: he
leaves, he reoffends. The third reason he might be put in prison is to rehabilitate him—to change him so that he does not reoffend. That is clearly not working, because he is obviously reoffending. The final view put forward by judges or magistrates is that there is no alternative: they have tried everything else with this person, so what else can they do other than put him in prison? But it is not working. The idea that there is no alternative to putting this person in and bringing him out again cannot possibly make sense.

That brings us to the nub of the issue: prison, for somebody such as that, does not seem to be working. A better way of dealing with them would be a community sentence that addressed the fundamental problem, which is that this man is a heroin addict. The right kind of treatment programme is not about being soft on the individual, but about protecting the public. If we can turn his life around so that he is not coming out and reoffending seven more times in a year, that shop is protected and the public are protected from the misery of crime.

It is also worth bearing in mind the prison itself. Our prisons are currently facing a rising tide of violence, a rising tide of drugs and a rising tide of assaults on prison officers and prisoners. An enormous amount of that is driven by short-term prisoners. The way that drugs get into prison is frequently through prisoners bringing them in, often inside their bodies. The people who are coming in and out of those prisons most frequently are, of course, prisoners with short-term prison sentences—people such as the man I met, who are coming in and out eight times in a year. By definition, if someone has been put in prison for 20 years, they only have one opportunity to bring drugs into prison. Someone who is going in and out on short sentences is really contributing to that flow.

Furthermore, someone who is not imprisoned for 20 years does not have the same incentives to engage with the regime. Somebody who is in for 20 years will often settle down and focus on work and education; they need to make a life in prison. Somebody who is in for a few weeks simply does not have the same attitude toward prison. Therefore, from the point of view of a prison governor or prison officer, the prisoners on whom they are spending an enormous amount of time are those on short-term prison sentences.

That relates also to self-harm and suicide: people are at their most vulnerable in prison on their first night there. It is very destabilising to go into a prison. That is when much of the self-harm and suicide happens, so a lot of the prison officers’ focus is on those people who are coming in and out for a few weeks, but it is difficult to do them much good. In Durham Prison, the average length of stay at the moment is 10 days. Ten days cannot possibly be long enough to get someone into an education programme, a work programme or a drug treatment programme.

Prison is and should be a very serious thing. It is very expensive. In certain cases, it costs more than sending someone to Eton. It is incredibly complex to manage. We are dealing potentially with people who could be terrorists, murderers or sex offenders and with a complicated regime moving people in and out of cells, keeping them safe in prison and dealing with self-harm. That requires an enormous amount of professionalism. Having a safe, stable, decent prison, which would be helped by not having prisoners on short-term sentences, would help us to focus on the more serious prisoners and to do the professional work to turn their lives around.

We must get the right kind of community sentence in place, ensure that those people are not destabilised by being dragged in and out of prison all the time and recognise that the wrong type of short sentence is long enough to harm them but not long enough to change them. It is long enough to harm them because they lose their house, their partner and, if they have one, a job; they come into prison, and—bang!—a few weeks later they are back out on the streets again, with none of the support networks that might keep them stable, they commit crime again and they are back inside prison.

If we can find a way of working with them in the community, we can prove what is absolutely clear from all the research we have done: they are less likely to reoffend after a community sentence than after a short prison sentence. If I take that man in Bedford Prison as an illustration, that individual, given a community sentence, is less likely to go on to commit that ninth shoplifting offence than if he is put in prison for the eighth time. If he is put in prison for the eighth time, he will almost certainly go on to reoffend; in fact, in two thirds of cases, short-term prison sentence prisoners do so. That is endangering the public, not protecting the public.

What I have talked about today is an expansion on what the hon. Member for Islwyn said, referring to the problem that we face. The solution is much more difficult. We will have to bring parties together in Parliament, we will have to discuss it with judges and magistrates, and above all we will have to discuss it with the public. Our primary obligation is to protect the public from crime, to show our moral abhorrence at crime and our sympathy of its victims, and also to explain that in order to protect the public, we need to be practical and focused. One way of being practical and focused is to be honest about the problems of short-sentence prisoners. I will allow the hon. Gentleman some time for closing remarks.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Minister, that does not happen in a 30-minute debate. If you would like to continue, you can.

Rory Stewart: I am so sorry; I would be delighted to continue. Many apologies. Perhaps an intervention from the hon. Member for Islwyn?

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Yes; I was just going to say that.

Chris Evans: I find myself in the happy position of agreeing with everything the Minister has said. His critique of what is going on with short sentences is spot on. I know there are hon. Members on the Opposition side who would be interested to meet with him and talk about a way forward, and I hope we can get those meetings in place. I only regret that the debate was only half an hour; I think we could have spoken all day about this subject.

Rory Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much. To conclude, we must focus on what outcome we want—not the process, which is the prison, but the outcome. The outcome must be to find the right way of protecting the
public, and whether we are talking about punishment, deterrence, incapacitation or rehabilitation, there are serious problems with short-term sentences.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Human Rights: Xinjiang

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):
I beg to move, That this House has considered human rights in Xinjiang.

2.30 pm

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss this issue. I am also pleased to see a good number of other MPs in the Chamber, given the importance of business elsewhere in the Palace. I am grateful for their support. I place on the record my appreciation of the work in this area of various non-governmental organisations, including Amnesty International, Christian Solidarity Worldwide—CSW—Human Rights Watch and the World Uyghur Congress.

I also add the BBC to that list. It was a remarkable 10-minute report by John Sweeney on “Newsnight” in August 2018 that first brought this issue to my attention; I am ashamed to say that I knew nothing about it until that point. In that 10 minutes he described very graphically the scale of what is happening in Xinjiang province and well illustrated the human cost. Even if the BBC does nothing else worth watching over the next 12 months—I do not completely discount that possibility—that 10 minutes alone justifies the licence fee.

The concerns that I and, I hope, others will raise are all supported by evidence, although there are other concerns that are not so well evidenced. However, even on those concerns for which evidence exists it is impossible to be entirely accurate, as we shall see when looking at the numbers affected. That is principally a consequence of the secrecy and surveillance of the government of the Xinjiang province, which is said to extend not only within the province but outside it as well. Uyghur Muslims living in this country feel very much under the same pressure as those who live in Xinjiang. Parenthetically, I hear anecdotal reports that the Chinese secret service has been recruiting Chinese students at British universities to spy on other Chinese students, thus continuing and worsening the climate of secrecy and fear.

However, thanks to the evidence of “Newsnight” and the efforts of Amnesty, CSW and Human Rights Watch, we have an emerging picture on an epic scale. What is being done in Xinjiang is also happening in Tibet, where mass detention camps have been a feature of the landscape since 2014. The so-called re-education camps, officially known as centres for transformation through education, are principally, but not exclusively, targeted at the Muslim community.

CSW lists reasons for detention in the camps including, among other things: someone having WhatsApp on their phone; having relatives who live abroad; accessing religious materials online; having visited certain “sensitive” countries; participation in communal religious activities; and behaviour indicating “wrong thinking” or “religious extremism”. Indeed, sometimes no reason is given at all.

Amnesty gives some useful context, stating:

“China’s Constitution, laws and ethnic policies all stress ethnic unity and prohibit discrimination against ethnic groups...But China’s expressed determination to eradicate the ‘forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism’ leads officials to pursue discriminatory
policies that target members of ethnic groups merely for exercising their rights to freedom of religion and belief, thought, peaceful assembly, association, movement, opinion, expression and access to information.”

Quite incredibly, the Chinese Government continues to deny the existence of these camps. However, eyewitness accounts, documentation relating to the construction and procurement of the camps, and satellite imagery all contradict that denial. The number of detainees is said to be between several hundred thousand and just over 1 million, with CSW saying that it may be as high as 3 million. We can be certain that that number is rising.

What goes on within these detention facilities has been described as Orwellian, which I think, because of what we know, does some injustice to George Orwell. If George Orwell was commissioned to write in the style of Franz Kafka, that might come close. Inmates are required to chant Communist party slogans, recite party thought and take part in self-incrimination sessions.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I thank the Minister for his help in answering several of my questions on this issue. Does the right hon. Gentleman share the concern of many in my constituency, most importantly Mohammed Haroun, representing the Uxbridge Street mosque, who wrote to me to say that the scale of Muslim persecution in China makes what is happening in Myanmar pale into insignificance, and that we must act?

Mr Carmichael: I always think it invidious to try to compare persecution in one country with that in another. However, the right hon. Gentleman’s point is a good one. I suspect that we do not hear more about this issue because of the difficulty in getting reliable information out of the province. I will return to that point.

To give a bit more of a human flavour of what goes on in the camps, I will share with the House, and place on the record, a couple of the testimonies from that “Newsnight” report in August. The first is from Azat, whose family are detained in the camp. He describes having been allowed to visit his family, saying:

“it was dinner time. There were at least 1,200 people holding empty plastic bowls in their hands. They had to sing pro-Chinese songs to get food. I never dreamt the place was so huge. The cell windows were barred. From the lights, I knew there were many more people inside as well. I estimate that there were at least 3,500 people in there.”

He describes them, saying:

“They were like robots. They seemed to have lost their souls. I knew many of them well—we used to sit and eat together—but now they didn’t look normal to me. They behaved as if they weren’t aware of what they were doing. They were like someone who’d lost their memory after a car crash.”

There was a further interview with a re-education centre survivor called Omir, who said:

“They have a chair called the tiger. My ankles were shackled, my hands locked into the chair, I couldn’t move. They wouldn’t let me sleep. They also hung me up for hours and they beat me. They had thick wooden and rubber batons, whips made from twisted wire, needles to pierce the skin, pliers for pulling out your nails. All these tools were displayed on the table in front of me, ready for use at any time. You could hear other people screaming as well.

You have no freedom at all. You must do everything according to the rules set by the Communist party: recite what they say, sing red songs, thank the party, think like a robot. You do whatever you are told.”

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is hard to listen to some of those descriptions of the situation in the camps and the psychological pressures placed on people. Has the right hon. Gentleman heard evidence, as I have, that DNA samples and biometric data are also being obtained from Uyghurs in the camps, perhaps for the possibility of organ harvesting? That issue has been raised in relation to China before.

Mr Carmichael: I have heard that suggested. The evidence around the purpose of the use of DNA harvesting—I think, clearly the fact that it is suggested demands proper investigation. I think it is something that we as a country could do, and that we should lead on exerting pressure for such an investigation; but whether or not that is actually happening, I do not honestly know and I am careful not to overstate the case. What we know, and what is evidenced already, is certainly bad enough.

The human rights report produced by the Minister’s own Department, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in June 2018 said of Xinjiang that “the authorities introduced intrusive security and surveillance measures and cultural restrictions targeted at the Uyghur Muslim population. Thousands of Uyghurs were held in re-education camps after returning from abroad.”

I would suggest, on the basis of what we know now—what has come to light since then—that if anything, that is something of an understatement. I will look with interest to see how that statement is revised in this year’s human rights report.

I am conscious of the shortage of time and am grateful for the support of colleagues who have turned up for the debate. I could say a lot more, but I will focus now on why this matter should concern us and what my asks are of the Minister. First, it should concern us because the United Kingdom is a party to several declarations of human rights, including the universal declaration. The defining characteristic of human rights is surely their universality. An abuse or denial of human rights anywhere is a denial that affects us all.

The issue affects a number of Uyghur Muslims living in this country. “Newsnight” spoke of one case in which a family member had lost contact with up to 20 members of her family, who had possibly been taken into detention. What we know about the threats to the Muslim population in Xinjiang province raises serious questions for our own asylum policy. We know that there are some 10 Uyghur Muslims with active asylum claims at the moment. I know that this is not directly within the Minister’s responsibilities, but the Government should consider following the example of Sweden and Germany and introducing a moratorium on returns to China of Muslims from the Uyghur province.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter to the Chamber for us to debate. The issue is not only the need for pressure in relation to asylum applications and so on. Other authoritarian states are copying that example and piling in and persecuting citizens in a similar way.
Mr Carmichael: That is absolutely the case. It is the contagion of the abuse of human rights. We have seen it times without number in different parts of the world down the decades.

What consideration have the Government given to the use of section 13 of the Criminal Finances Act 2017 in response to gross human rights abuses? This could be a good first test of that section. Most importantly of all, what will the Government in this country do to see that an independent investigation is carried out into what is happening in Xinjiang province? The Chinese Government have said that they would be prepared to co-operate with a UN-led investigation. As a permanent member of the Security Council and as an advocate and strong promoter and defender of human rights, our country could take an important lead in making that sort of investigation happen. We should not be relying on groups such as Amnesty, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Human Rights Watch to find out what is going on.

Human rights are to be defended wherever they are challenged. The right to religious belief should be defended, and everyone has a right to due process. None of these things features in the way in which Uyghur Muslims and others in Xinjiang province are treated. We have a direct interest at play also. It is obvious that the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang is now acting as a recruiting sergeant for Daesh, for IS. As that happens, yes, of course its primary focus will be in relation to China, but we know from our own experience that Daesh, IS, does not confine its activities to any single country, so Britain has a very direct interest in ensuring that the rights of Muslims and others of religious faith in Xinjiang province are protected, and that the abuses are brought into the public domain so that their human rights and those of others can be protected.

Several hon. Members rose—

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. Several people want to speak, and I want the Back-Bench speeches to finish at 28 minutes past 3 so that we can give the three Front Benchers 10 minutes each and then allow two minutes for the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who moved the motion, to conclude his remarks, so I ask people to keep their speeches to about five minutes. I do not want to impose a time limit. If we play it that way, we should get everybody in.

2.45 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate, and I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing it and for his speech, with which I very much concur.

Last week, as chair of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission, I was able to meet a Uyghur Muslim who is now living in Washington DC and part of the NGO the Uyghur Entrepreneurs Network. He said that, about two years ago, Uyghurs who use Washington as a base—there are now about 3,000 of them—started reporting that relatives in China were disappearing. He says that, now, every Uyghur he meets there has a relative who has disappeared. Indeed, all of his own relatives have disappeared. The last one was his father, who sent a message to him saying, “Son, they have come for me.”

As we have heard, reports suggest that there are huge numbers—quite possibly more than 1 million—in the camps. People are often there for no reason at all. I am told that the difficulties experienced by Uyghur girls are such that they are even selected for Communist party officials to have relationships with them and used for bartering in exchange for their family’s freedom.

The religious dimension to the detentions is self-evident. Detainees are predominantly, although not exclusively, Muslim; they include people of Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz ethnicity. In this climate of fear, Uyghur Muslims have stopped public and communal religious observance. We have been told about the treatment of people once they are in the camps. Detainees have been not only forced to renounce their religion but forced, we understand, to eat pork or drink alcohol, in violation of their right to freedom of religion or belief. Conditions in the camps are extremely difficult, as we have heard.

The awful treatment extends even to children in the camps. Children as young as three can be detained, although sadly the children of those detained are often left to fend for themselves. We were told last week of one child who was found frozen—they had died when their parents were taken away. Children are often mistreated or sent to retraining centres. We have heard of children as young as six months old being locked up like farm animals in a shed.

Let me also draw the Minister’s attention to the concerns about DNA testing of Uyghurs, about which we have heard, and the potential that that might be being used for forced organ harvesting. I know that that is currently being investigated by the independent China tribunal, chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice, QC. It would be interesting to hear the Minister’s comments on that.

Bob Fu, of China Aid, told us last week that the human rights violations in terms of religious persecution are at their worst for some 40 years in China. I am grateful to the UK, during the universal periodic review, for calling on China to implement the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and to allow the UN to monitor the implementation. But the UK needs to do as much as it can to ensure international accountability for the human rights violations, so can the Minister say whether he will support the calls for the UK to work with others in the international community to establish an independent, impartial and comprehensive UN-led investigation and to work towards the establishment of a mechanism for accountability on this issue?

Let me also draw colleagues’ attention to concerns in America. In relation to what is said to be happening in China, the Washington Post says:

“It’s hard to read that as anything other than a declaration of genocidal intent.”

This month, members of Congress and the Senate introduced the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, which calls for the President to condemn the abuses, for the Secretary of State to co-ordinate closely with the traditional allies on targeted sanctions and restrictions, and for the appointment of a US special co-ordinator for the Uyghur autonomous region. It also calls on the private sector to conduct due diligence in dealings with China, and asks the FBI to track and take steps to hold accountable officials from China who harass, threaten or intimidate US citizens and legal permanent residents. I hope the
Minorities are now facing unprecedented levels of repression. The state policy overlooks the rights of Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim citizens of non-Han identity who have been present for some time, the last two years have seen violent escalation in the Xinjiang region. The experts I spoke to emphasised that while the reports of widespread abuse in the Xinjiang region are overlooked.

We have all been made aware of the plight of the Uyghurs in the last year or so by the media coverage, the satellite images, and those who have family and friends in the region, who talk about the abuses taking place. Last week I met with several human rights groups to discuss the reports of widespread abuse in the Xinjiang region. The experts I spoke to emphasised that while tensions between the Communist party and the Chinese citizens of non-Han identity have been present for some time, the last two years have seen violent escalation in the state policy. Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim minorities are now facing unprecedented levels of repression.

Since 2017, a network of enormous holding camps has been built, with as many as 1 million Uyghurs said to be currently detained in them. As evidence of these camps has become indisputable, thanks largely to investigative journalism, we have seen a shift in the rhetoric of the Chinese state. Colleagues will be aware that for a long time the Chinese Government denied the reports that the camps existed and that people were falsely detained in them. Now, of course, they say, “Oh yes, there are camps, but they are vocational training centres and educational centres.” I am not the only one who is very sceptical of this. The United Nations and our Government have publicly expressed deep concerns about those sites.

Given that individuals are forcibly placed within them, we must recognise that they are camps. There has also been evidence of physical abuse and torture of the people there, as eloquently set out by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). If individuals are forcibly placed within them, measures have lost all sense of proportion. Uyghurs outside the camps are now also subject to some of the most pervasive and intrusive surveillance systems in the world, including being on a register of DNA samples and blood types, and constant tracking by facial recognition cameras. Thousands of police stations have sprung up across the region and correspondence with family members outside of China is either banned or closely monitored.

We have heard of various religious and psychological violations. In a secularised society such as Britain, choices of food, drink or dress may not seem so fundamental, but for those of faith, who are brought up in cultural environments where certain foods are prohibited and alcohol is not drunk, forcing people to abandon those articles of faith is deeply dehumanising. Not only are they prevented from practising their religion, but they are forcibly fed with meat that they do not normally consume and forced to drink alcohol, which they do not normally do. That is surely traumatising. They are prevented from fasting in the month of Ramadan, their dresses are cut to make their clothing more in line with everyone else, they are asked to remove their headscarves, and they are asked to quote the Communist manifesto and learn about China. Forcing them to do these things takes away their identity.

When the state begins to isolate and discriminate against a minority group, it has overstepped the mark of acceptability. When the state sends citizens into camps without legal representation or international oversight, the door is left open to something truly terrible. We have to condemn such actions in the strongest terms. History has shown us that such actions can lead to even worse atrocities. If the world stands by and does nothing, in light of what is happening, what is to say that it will not continue and escalate to another level?

China has said that it welcomes an inspection, as long as the UN restrains itself from interfering in domestic matters. What does that mean? Will the Chinese Government give the investigators the right to visit these prison camps? Will they give the investigators the freedom to speak to the people there? Will they allow the investigators to investigate things properly? If they are saying that those things are not happening, they should allow for it to be openly investigated, so we can all know whether they are happening or not. The Chinese Government should realise—as should Governments worldwide—that when they start suppressing their own people, they do not solve any problems. If anything, they make the problems worse.

I ask the Minister, what specific representations have been made to the Chinese Government about these concerns? Have these issues been raised with the embassies of those countries with large Uyghur diasporas, including Kazakhstan and Turkey? What steps are we taking, to ensure that our position on the Human Rights Council is used to place real pressure on the Chinese Government to reverse those measures? What efforts are being taken to gather evidence on the ground and apply diplomatic pressure on the Chinese Government? Does the Minister agree that the UK border authorities should make every effort to ensure that the Turkic and Uyghur Muslims residing in the UK are not deported back to Xinjiang, because of what they would face?

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): There are more than 10 million Uyghurs living in Xinjiang. They speak a Turkic language. They are Muslim. In many ways, they are culturally and geographically closer to central Asia than central China. Over the past decade, due to outbreaks of protest and violence, and the subsequent harsh crackdowns from the Chinese authorities, hundreds of lives have been lost in Xinjiang.

A BBC investigation said:

“Over the past four years, Xinjiang has been the target of some of the most restrictive and comprehensive security measures ever deployed by a state against its own people."

That includes the large-scale use of technology and penalties to curtail Islamic identity, stopping them practising their religion. Uyghurs face severe travel restrictions and are subject to ethnic profiling at thousands of checkpoints. Most alarmingly, as we have heard already, the Chinese authorities are building and operating high-security camps on a huge and growing scale. Testimonies from Uyghurs living abroad confirm that they are detention
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3.2 pm

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): I call Lyn Brown. If you stick to four minutes, we will get everybody in.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I will do my best, Mr Wilson. I have filleted my speech as I have been sitting here.

Last October, a senior editor from Foreign Policy, James Palmer, was interviewed about his work and about human rights in Xinjiang. It was a heart-wrenching watch. He said:

“All of my Uyghur sources are gone”, and then apologised as he broke down in tears. He continued:

“I can’t talk to people because they’re gone. I cannot reach them.”

Even his Han Chinese sources had been arrested for talking about what is happening to the Uyghur people. They are disappearing from the streets and being put into camps. The Government appear to be trying to erase the memory that they even existed. Mr Palmer made it clear that he is no longer trying to contact Uyghur people because his attempts could put them in danger.

In October, in response to a question from me, the Minister stated that according to credible reports an estimated 1 million people—at least—were being held, including Uyghurs and other minority ethnic Chinese. As has been said, Chinese officials describe the camps as “vocational education and employment training centres” for “criminals involved in minor offenses”, but Human Rights Watch has gathered evidence that points chillingly to something else.

Basically, there are reports of beatings, solitary confinement, psychological abuse and even inmates being forcibly given psychotic drugs in the camps. We are told that people with serious mental and physical health conditions receive no special treatment; nor do heavily pregnant women. There are reports of deaths inside the camps. Survivors have described to Human Rights Watch how they were chained to a bed or to an iron chair for days, or even hung from the ceiling, as they were interrogated. They eventually confessed to whatever they were charged with, whether that was owning a religious book or having a friend who had been abroad.
I have arrived at five thoughts to share with hon. Members. First, Xinjiang, which means “new land” in Mandarin, was known as East Turkestan for a long time. Although the name has changed, the essential cultural differences of that huge province remain fundamental to the way of life of its residents.

Secondly, the UK, which reopened formal relations with China in 1972—56 years ago—is now an important strategic partner of China and the depth of that relationship allows for respectful differences of view. Although we acknowledge and hugely recognise the vast progress that China has made in the living standards of its enormous population, and its contribution to the world’s economic growth—a consistent 30% for the last three decades—we can also express real concern about specific human rights issues in China and work with her on reforms to the rule of law, including on the death penalty, which has been one of the achievements of the Great Britain-China Centre.

Thirdly, on Xinjiang today, there can be no doubt that relations between the peoples of Xinjiang, by whom I mean predominantly the Uyghur community, but also other ethnic minorities—Kazakhs and people who would normally be found in Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz—have deteriorated considerably. They have worsened recently after a clampdown on the freedoms of expression, gathering and religion, and other freedoms that have been mentioned. Much of the evidence is anecdotal because it is very difficult to access information at first hand either by visiting the province or through journalists and others who have been there.

Wera Hobhouse: Is it not the case that we need to ask for a reciprocal access policy? If we can have the same access as Chinese people have when they come to our country, that would be the first step. Ultimately, that would be exactly what we could negotiate.

Richard Graham: I understand the hon. Lady’s point. It would not be impossible for her or others to go to Xinjiang. The question is what they would see and how genuine it might be. The point I want to highlight is that in recent times there has been much greater use of artificial intelligence and sophisticated control mechanisms to clamp down strongly on what we would regard as the fundamental freedoms of the people living there. The Minister might want to comment on this, but the opportunity is for the UK to try to help China recognise that some of the evidence coming out will not necessarily act in China’s own interests.

Of course, China has considerable security interests. For example, the bombing of the railway station in Yunnan a few years ago by Uyghurs was absolutely unacceptable, just as terrorism in this country is unacceptable. It is important that there are training and skills opportunities available to Uyghurs as there are in other parts of the country. But a large-scale detention policy of large numbers of people, or other repressions of freedoms such as Islamic boys under the age of 18 not being able to go and pray in a mosque, are not justified. Such issues will affect China’s belt and road initiative across central Asia, which is predominantly Muslim by the religion, and there are issues that will damage China’s reputation internationally and affect the world’s acceptance of the increasing leadership role that China is taking on a range of global issues.
[Richard Graham]

It is worth highlighting China’s report to the United Nations General Assembly on China’s human rights. In the report submitted in August last year—some 25 pages long—only one paragraph in the entire report is on Xinjiang, as I am sure the Minister knows. The report refers to the year of building people’s livelihood initiative, the disposable incomes of urban and rural residents and free education programmes, all of which are no doubt worthy in their own right, but they do not address the issues that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and others have raised today.

Although China would regard our interest in such matters as fundamentally interfering in her own domestic situation, the truth is that in this House we debate issues across the world for the benefit of all mankind. Today’s debate therefore shines a torch on the fact that we need to work closely with China on how the situation in Xinjiang will develop and on what changes might be made that will benefit the people of Xinjiang, particularly the Uyghur community, and China’s own standing in the world. Our role should be to work closely with her on some of those difficult issues.

3.14 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Wilson, and I thank you for calling me. I also thank the Minister, who, we know, has a deep interest in human rights and I am sure we will get a positive response from him when he replies. Finally, I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this important and timely debate just a week after Orkney was named the happiest place in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—we already know that, as it is epitomised by the right hon. Gentleman. However, we are gathered here to discuss a serious issue.

The debate is timely because it takes place in the week of Holocaust Memorial Day, when we remember how millions of people were rounded up and placed in camps and harassed, tortured and killed simply because of their religion. It is deeply saddening that some 70 years later we are having a debate to discuss the fact that potentially millions of innocent Chinese citizens are being rounded up and placed in camps because of their religion. It seems we have yet to learn the lessons of the past—oh, that we had looked back at the past and learned the lessons.

It is important to note that just yesterday evening, right here in Parliament, where today we are discussing persecution by the Chinese Government on an unimaginable scale, the Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Foreign Secretary were guests of honour at a celebratory reception for the Chinese new year. It is a coincidence: we are discussing very serious issues within 24 hours of a celebration. Although I am a firm believer in friendly and open dialogue, I am not sure what message that sends to the world and to the millions currently in detention camps in China about the UK’s commitment to human rights and defending those who are persecuted for their religion.

Hon. Members know that I chair the all-party group for freedom of religion or belief. Our group stands up for those of Christian faith, other faiths and no faith. Hon. Members have rightly raised the plight of the Uyghurs, but I want to make sure we do not forget the plight of some of the other religious or belief minorities suffering at the hands of the Chinese Government: for example, practitioners of Falun Gong and Chinese Christians. Twice a year the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and I co-sponsor events in this House for Falun Gong. I want to put on the record our thanks to Becky James, who works so hard to make it happen.

In 2018, Cristian Solidarity Worldwide recorded extremely concerning violations against Catholic and Protestant churches in Henan province, where authorities have demolished crosses and churches and destroyed religious materials. From March to June, dozens of independent house churches also reported cases of harassment, fines, confiscation of property and forced closure of churches. Many Christians have also been arrested or disappeared. For example, Lu Yongfeng, a member of the Church of Almighty God, was arrested with her husband in June 2018. The following month she died in police custody, reportedly as a result of torture. I look to the Minister to ask him this: can we make inquiries about what happened to that lady? She died in custody because she is a Christian. That was the reason for her death.

Similarly, thousands of practitioners of Falun Gong have been arbitrarily imprisoned by the Chinese Government. There are credible reports that China is using prisoners of conscience to supply organs for its vast, lucrative transplant industry. In response to such accusations, the UK Government have said that the World Health Organisation believes that China is implementing an ethical, voluntary organ transplant system. However, many who argue that China is involved in forced organ harvesting often point to the fact that the average time to get a kidney transplant in the UK or the United States is two to three years, whereas in China it is two to three weeks. It is fairly obvious; you do not have to be a mathematician or Einstein to work out that something is wrong there. It is almost like a conveyor belt of organ transplant in China, and that needs an answer.

Has the Minister asked either the World Health Organisation or the Chinese Government how they can explain such a remarkable difference? Also, does the Minister know whether the World Health Organisation has assessed the wealth of evidence compiled by former Canadian Cabinet Minister David Kilgour on this issue? It is a phenomenal evidential base. If not, will he suggest it does so? Might he also suggest that it assesses the evidence being presented to the ongoing independent people’s tribunal being led by Sir Geoffrey Nice, QC?

The tribunal recently released an interim judgment that reads:

“We, the tribunal members, are all certain, unanimously, beyond reasonable doubt, that in China forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience has been practised for a substantial period of time, involving a very substantial number of victims”—innocent victims—

“by state organised or approved organisations or individuals.”

The horrifying nature of the charges makes them difficult to believe and we must rightly assess the evidence before jumping to any conclusions. However, we also must make every effort to gather and assess evidence honestly, and not just turn our backs on the issue because what
we may find out might not be palatable. We must speak out when we see the evidence, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because how can we ever hope for a peaceful and secure world where a permanent member of the UN Security Council is rounding up and abusing millions of its own citizens?

Such crimes against humanity—affronts to human dignity and to the very concept of justice and morality—cannot be allowed to pass by without condemnation. There is a time for quiet diplomacy, discreet dialogue and private conversations. This is not it. This is a time to stand up for what is right. This is a time to let every oppressor and would-be tyrant know that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—and the rest of the world—will not tacitly accept the systematic, sinister destruction of entire communities. This is a time for the world to rally together and proudly declare, in one unified, powerful voice, that enough is enough. That should be our message today.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): We now have a little extra time, so I shall bring in the Front Benchers at 15.32. There are four minutes each.

3.20 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate.

I shall not speak for long. I just want to say a little about Hikvision, one of the world’s biggest CCTV companies. It provides equipment for the massive prison camps in Xinjiang and has been used in Tibet to develop an extremely intrusive police and security apparatus. Hikvision uses facial recognition technology that can distinguish entire ethnic populations from the Chinese. It puts Tibetans and Uyghurs at serious risk. While the company is now subject to bans by the US and Australian companies, it is still subject to bans by the US and European leaders of economic sanctions to be directed at key Chinese leaders and security companies. I understand that the Foreign Secretary raised the situation of Uyghur Muslims with his counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during the official visit to China in July 2018. However, continued human rights abuses suggest that clearly more needs to be done.

Will the Minister provide urgent assurances that the British Government will step up their efforts to hold the Chinese Government to account for those blatant human rights violations and urge the Chinese authorities to stop the practice of mass internment and close the camps? Will he give an update on the current situation and tell us what representations the Government have made to the Chinese authorities?

3.24 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.

I am pleased that the debate has such a good turnout, and that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) was able to secure it. I think even more Members would have come if it had not been on such an important day for votes to do with the European Union. It is great to see so many participants from across the House. I am vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on China, and it is encouraging that many Members are joining, to discuss not just trade opportunities but the important human rights element of our dialogue with China. I was pleased that at last night’s reception the chair of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), mentioned in his keynote address that the group has that concern.

I am also pleased that, following a parliamentary question to the Minister, the issue emerged in the FCO reporting cycle. That is not recent; for several months it has been taken seriously by FCO officers. However, I should like an update from the Minister today, and a sense of the ultimate direction of travel. What can be done, if the reports are indeed true—as we believe they are, given the evidence coming before us? What is the endgame, in terms of what the Government will do?
3.28 pm

[Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) not just for bringing the debate to the House, but for his work to increase awareness of the issue in Xinjiang province. As he said, we are relying a lot on reports. The evidence is difficult to gather, and that is one of the big issues for us. However, we know that the state in China is not just promoting its values and principles, but using its position to commit cultural genocide and scapegoat an entire culture. History has taught us the danger of such intolerance.

It was interesting to hear the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) talking about his experiences in Xinjiang province, but I want to correct him on one thing. He said that the UK and China had had diplomatic relations since 1972, and that that was 56 years ago. Having been born in 1972, I must tell him that it was 46 years ago.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland and the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) gave descriptions of the horrific torture and conditions in the detention camps, and several Members made comparisons with other horrific situations. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that this debate was timely as it was being held in the week in which we remember the holocaust, and many of the conditions that have been described this afternoon are very similar to those found in the horrific concentration camps during the second world war. The hon. Gentleman also drew our attention to the plight of the Falun Gong community, and of ethnic Christians in China, who are also subjected to human rights abuses. The hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) spoke about religious abuse and Muslim people being forced to eat particular meats, or drink alcohol or wear inappropriate clothing—all things that we recognise would impact on someone’s freedom to practise their religion.

Reports from former detainees claim that women have been forced to take unidentified medication, which in some cases has stopped menstruation, and in other cases has resulted in severe bleeding. The use of female detainees as sex slaves was highlighted by the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) who, together with the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), raised serious concerns about the plight of children in detention centres, as well as those kept in separate locations. To hear reports of children as young as six months old being locked up without care or parents is disturbing and shameful for us all.

Dangerous propaganda is being peddled against the Uyghurs. It has been reported that the Han Chinese people who live in the region have been put through state-mandated self-defence drills; that as part of China’s suppression campaign, education portrays the Uyghurs as potentially dangerous extremists; and that a steady stream of Government news paints the Uyghurs as unsophisticated and uneducated.

Interestingly, China has said that it would welcome UN officials to Xinjiang if they follow China’s procedures and restrictions, but that is not how it works. There must be open access without any restrictions. If such a UN investigation concludes that Chinese activity in the region constitutes a violation of human rights, there must be decisive diplomatic condemnation and consequences for China. Human rights violations cannot go unchecked, particularly if sanctioned by the state on a massive scale.

The hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) mentioned a worrying trend developing in Chinese domestic and foreign policy, and respect to human rights abuses more generally. That trend includes sinister practices such as the collection of biometric data, including DNA and voice samples, and the use of biometrics for automated surveillance purposes should be causing us concern—the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) also raised that point. China holds more data on its citizens than any other country in the world, and we must wonder why it needs that data and what it is doing with it. None of us would object to our data being collected if we knew the purpose for it—data on health is fine, traffic data is okay, but we need to know the purpose and the ways it is being used. In China, however, those systems are being deployed without effective privacy protections in law, and people are unaware that their data is being gathered in that way.

Concerns about human rights records in China extend beyond what it does to its own citizens, and it is now trying to prevent meaningful international scrutiny,
including at the UN. Human Rights Watch recently reported that Chinese officials are working to weaken key human rights reviews at the UN. China remains a designated human rights priority country for the UK, but with trade and investment becoming more important for the UK in a post-Brexit Britain, there is a concern that the UK’s performance regarding human rights in China is far weaker than it should be. The Scottish First Minister met Chinese officials in April 2018, and she specifically raised human rights in China. Has the Minister done the same, and if not, does he intend to?

Karen Lee: Over the past few days we have had debates on subjects involving human rights in different countries. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is utterly wrong to be selective about where we see human rights abuses, and that we should call them out wherever they are, most importantly in China?

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely, although not “most importantly in China”—we must call out human rights abuses everywhere. Look at Saudi Arabia and what it is doing in Yemen, yet we are still selling arms there. We must think carefully about our trading partnerships.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland raised the issue of Chinese students, which is slightly controversial, and we must think about policy decisions that we take here and how they impact. A few years ago the post-study work visa was removed, and the diversity of our international students was greatly reduced. Far more Chinese students were happy to come for one or two years and go back, as opposed to in the past when students wanted to stay and work here. Because of that, the situation is ripe for exploitation, because different students can monitor the activity of other Chinese students. We need to be aware of what we are doing, and I call on the Minister to discuss the reinstatement of the post-study work visa. There are unintended consequences to such decisions.

Finally, will the Minister take every opportunity in public and private to condemn China’s use of these camps and all forms of non-legal detention? Will he speak up for the rights of children and use all possible levers to cease the practice of forcibly removing children from their homes and families? Will he call out human rights abuses, including violations of the right of freedom of religious belief, and will he seriously consider sanctions against policy makers responsible for human rights abuses in China? Finally, given the high risk to those returning to Xinjiang and other parts of China from overseas, will he hold discussions with his Home Office colleagues to ensure that those who are under threat are not forcibly removed from the UK and sent back to a harmful and dangerous situation in China?

3.38 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is nice to see you in the Chair, Mr Wilson, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this important debate. We are extremely grateful to him, because it gives us an opportunity to send a united message from this House to the Chinese Government about the unacceptable nature of what is happening in Xinjiang at the moment, and of our shared desire to see the detention camps closed.

I will begin my speech where the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) began his, because on Sunday afternoon I went to a holocaust memorial service in Bishop Auckland in my constituency. Everybody said, “Never again”, and “How did it happen?” It is all too clear how these things happen: they happen when it is too unpleasant or too inconvenient to think about them and people have a desire to look away. On Sunday, we pledged “to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free”.

We should make a reality of that commitment in the work that we do with respect to the Uyghur community in Xinjiang.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland set out the fundamental problems with the detention camps that have been set up, which we now believe are imprisoning about a million people, perhaps more. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) made a fearless speech; she is becoming well known for being fearless on human rights issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) described the denial of people’s religious rights. She gave a clear insight into how that might feel for this minority. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said that we should look for more reciprocity with the Chinese Government. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) gave powerful testimony and pointed to the important work undertaken by the voluntary sector.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who has been to Xinjiang several times, said that it was difficult because Xinjiang is in a very closed part of China, but that none the less we need to shine a light on the situation. The hon. Member for Strangford spoke about Christians being persecuted. My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) raised important concerns about the use of modern technologies to oppress people. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) asked how the Government would keep reporting back to us. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) spoke about the impact on children. I am particularly grateful to her for organising a meeting last summer at which we heard from academics who had looked at satellite images, from refugees and from relatives of people who are suffering.

It is absolutely clear that the situation in Xinjiang has deteriorated over the past four years. It is beginning to emerge and become clear to the rest of the world that what was suggested to be an attempt to prevent extremism and terrorism has morphed horrendously into the systematic oppression of a whole ethnic minority, who are being physically abused and psychologically indoctrinated. I am glad that the Minister has answered a number of parliamentary questions that I have tabled about Xinjiang: we know that Ministers have raised the matter and British diplomats have been in Xinjiang and gathered mounting evidence about the problem, but we can do more than tell the Chinese that we do not like the situation.

What can be done? Clearly it is important that we maintain public condemnation of the treatment of the Uyghur Muslims, and that we echo the call of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination for the Chinese authorities to shut down the re-education camps and facilitate the immediate release of all detainees. It is clear that there has been a lot of focus on work at the UN level; I do not know whether the Minister has
also discussed the matter with European colleagues, but I urge him to do so. The Government have the opportunity to continue to challenge the Chinese Government through intergovernmental forums. We would also like them to initiate calls for UN access to Xinjiang, including access by the UN Human Rights Council.

Many of my colleagues have spoken about the problems that asylum seekers face in this country. I know that that is a Home Office responsibility; none the less, it is all very well to talk about human rights abuses—we need to treat refugees well. I hope that the Minister will talk to the Home Office about that.

One possibility that the Government did not have a year ago is to use Magnitsky powers for personal sanctions. An obvious candidate for such sanctions is the Xinjiang state secretary, because it is since his arrival in that part of China that the oppression has screwed down in a particularly nasty way. Well, we have a lever now—let us use it. As well as looking at the activities of particular companies, I would like the Government to consider using export controls on surveillance technology that is used by the Chinese Government to monitor and oppress Uyghur Muslims. They should also review the operation of companies in Xinjiang. The simple message is that we are horrified by this state of affairs and we must always prioritise human rights over trading relations with the Chinese.

3.46 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I commend the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this important debate. Mischievously, perhaps, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) put it to us that Orkney and Shetland may be the happiest constituency in the country; on a day like today that may have something to do with its proximity to Norway, but I will not make too much of that point. There used to be a quiz question asked about the right hon. Gentleman and me because my constituency is the nearest to Westminster, while his is the furthest away.

As a last bit of levity in this important, serious and high-profile debate, may I say that it is great to hear from the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse)? She knows that I have a German mother; we used to tease my mother about her malapropisms. If the hon. Lady uses “reciprocity”, I am sure that very few of us could answer that we know much about Gegenseitigkeit. I thank the hon. Lady and all hon. Members present for their high quality of their contributions today; this is a serious debate and I do not wish to use any more levity.

If I may, I will update the House on the current situation in Xinjiang and the action that the Government propose. I do not have anything like the depth of knowledge of my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), but I have visited the region, not as a Minister, but on my very visit to China some 16 years ago. I was struck even then by the atmosphere of tension. There was clearly a very large Muslim population in many of the towns and cities of the autonomous region close to the Mongolian border, but there was also a sense—that was only a couple of years after 9/11—that human rights issues were beginning to crowd in. We have seen that happen with much more serious effect in recent years.

The ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang have faced a variety of restrictions on their freedom of religion and belief, freedom of speech and freedom of association over several years—indeed, for decades past. Xinjiang’s energy reserves and geopolitical significance are likely to be key factors in the Chinese Government’s close involvement in the region. Xinjiang is home to China’s largest gas fields, half of its coal deposits and an estimated 20% of its oil reserves.

The Strike Hard campaign was initiated following an outbreak of violence, including bombings and knife attacks, in 2009. As many hon. Members have said, it has developed into the intensive crackdown that we are seeing today. The situation has deteriorated rapidly over the past two or three years, particularly—as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) rightly pointed out—since the appointment of a new regional party secretary, Chen Quanguo. He had previously held the same position in Tibet, where he obviously earned his spurs as far as the Chinese authorities were concerned.

Mr Chen has introduced many of the techniques that he used in Tibet to monitor residents in Xinjiang. In fact, he has developed them further and fused them with a system of “political re-education camps”. However, we should also be clear that although Mr Chen has been a leading architect of the crackdown on the Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities, culpability for the worsening situation does not lie with him alone. His actions have been supported at the highest levels by the Chinese leadership.

Many hon. Members have already said that there are credible and important reports by non-governmental organisations describing the restrictive and oppressive measures being employed by the Chinese authorities, and quoted those reports. Our own diplomats visited Xinjiang as recently as December last year and their report painted a similarly bleak picture of the oppression being suffered by over a million Uyghurs and other minorities.

Let me speak for a moment about the specific measures that the authorities are using in Xinjiang. Among other things, traditional and unexceptional expressions of religious observance are now banned, from giving children religious names to having an “abnormal” beard or wearing a veil; I think the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) went into some detail about some of the oppressive practices that are being imposed on the local community.

As part of an apparent attempt to redefine Islam and to sinicise the Uyghur culture, extensive cultural restrictions have also been introduced, including the restriction on the use of the traditional Uyghur language. Contravention of the rules is likely to lead to detention and other punishments.

Uyghurs and members of other minorities with overseas connections, whether they have family members living abroad or a history of travel themselves, are deemed to be particularly suspicious and are highly likely to be detained. Families are monitored closely, including by Han Chinese officials, who they are obliged to host in their homes for several days at a time. Outside the
home. Uyghurs and other minorities are reportedly watched closely through extensive use of sophisticated technologies, as has been pointed out already, which is supported by a heavy police presence. However, as has also been mentioned during the debate, what most concerns many of us is that over 1 million Uyghur Muslims—more than 10% of the Uyghur population—and other ethnic minorities have at one time or another been held in extra-judicial camps, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) pointed out.

It is not known just how long each individual is detained, what chance they have of being released or what the mechanism for release might be, or whether they can appeal their detention. However, what is clear is that these detentions have split up families, left many children effectively orphaned, as the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) pointed out, and created an overbearing culture of fear.

Much of this activity was considered by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in its report last August. It issued very detailed recommendations, including that China should

“Halt the practice of detaining individuals who have not been lawfully charged, tried and convicted for a criminal offence in any extra-legal detention facilities”.

In addition to the extra-judicial camps, and according to Chinese Government data, criminal arrests in Xinjiang accounted for an alarming 21% of the total number of arrests in China in 2017, when the population in Xinjiang makes up only 1.5% of China’s total population.

As a number of Members have pointed out, China’s response to the increasing expressions of international concern was initially simply to deny the existence of these camps. Later, it sought to brand them as education and training facilities, and it justified them on the basis of counter-terrorism. As I think all of us know, there have been incidents in the past, but this is a wholly unprecedented and unwarranted over-reaction to that matter.

China claims that the camps are a necessary part of the policy to prevent extremism and that other countries have no right to interfere in its internal affairs. The Chinese authorities naturally have the right to address genuine security concerns in Xinjiang. However, all the evidence to hand suggests that their action is disproportionate and indiscriminate, and it is a response that, as a number of Members have pointed out, will be counterproductive in the long term, because it will exacerbate a whole range of ethnic tensions.

In this way, I believe that China is causing untold suffering to millions of its own citizens. It is also contravening its own constitutional provisions on freedom of religion and indeed its obligations under the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UK is, of course, deeply concerned about the situation in Xinjiang. We believe strongly that everyone everywhere should enjoy equal rights and protections under the law. That is why we are promoting and defending human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, as a fundamental part of our own foreign policy.

It was right that the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green pointed out that in areas such as climate change, anti-money laundering, and indeed in combating modern-day slavery, we are making some progress alongside the Chinese authorities. Despite that co-operation, and notwithstanding our deep and strong relationship with China, we must and will have no hesitation about raising these issues of concern. Realistically, doing that at the UN Security Council will not have a great impact. Therefore, doing it in Geneva and through the European Union, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland rightly pointed out, is the more productive way forward.

The situation in Xinjiang is one of the most serious areas of human rights concerns in relation to our relationship with China.

**Fiona Bruce:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mark Field:** Forgive me; I will not give way because I am running out of time and I want to touch on all the issues.

Our lobbying of China takes place both bilaterally and in multilateral forums. I myself raised the issue of Xinjiang during my visit to five cities in China last July, as did my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary during his visit to Beijing later that month.

In the UK’s “item 4” statement at the UN Human Rights Council in September, we raised several of our concerns about Xinjiang. And during China’s universal periodic review at the UN on 6 November, we pressed China on when it would implement the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. In our formal statement during the review itself, we urged China to

“Immediately implement the Committee’s recommendations on Xinjiang and allow the UN to monitor their implementation.”

Additionally, we have applied such pressure both in private and in public, working strategically with likeminded international partners, in particular, of course, with EU member states and others, to raise awareness of our concerns.

I will touch on one or two of the specific concerns that were expressed in the debate. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland asked about the moratorium on returns of failed asylum seekers. As has been pointed out, that is a Home Office competency and responsibility. However, I understand that the Home Office has recently updated its guidance notes for asylum caseworkers, which I think reflects the latest situation in Xinjiang, and those guidance notes will be kept under constant review.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East called for an independent inquiry. The UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has said that her office is seeking access to Xinjiang as a matter of urgency, to verify what she regards as very worrying reports about the “re-education camps”. We support her call for access and we continue to urge the Chinese Government to grant unrestricted access to the UN, so that it can take care of this matter.

The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) talked about Hikvision CCTV, which is a very specific case. We are obviously aware of the reports of Hikvision’s specific role in providing facial recognition cameras for use in Xinjiang. I will be happy to write to the hon. Lady with more details about that, and indeed I will be happy to write to other Members to deal with the one or two other matters that came up during the debate that I am not able to discuss now.
To conclude, the Government watch with very deep concern the Chinese authorities’ crackdown on Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang, and in particular the huge numbers of people in detention, apparently without recourse to due process of law. In the interests of the people of Xinjiang and for the long-term stability of that region, and indeed in the interests of China’s own international reputation, it is vital that China implements the recommendations of the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and honours its own human rights commitments. We shall continue to urge the Chinese Government to change their course and to meet those commitments.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): I call Mr Carmichael to wind up the debate.

3.58 pm

Mr Carmichael: Thank you very much, Mr Wilson, for calling me to speak again.

I thank the Minister for that response. We should not fool ourselves that we will probably be the main focus of the world’s attention in Parliament today. However, in many ways that is unfortunate, because the debate we have had here today illustrates what is possible in this place when we manage to put aside differences, and find areas of common concern and work together.

In that regard, I hope that today is not just an event itself but the start of a process by which we might take forward our concerns on an ongoing basis, because a very clear message has been sent out from here today, which I hope will be heard not only in this country but in China itself. It is that we know what is going on in Xinjiang and we are not just going to sit back and be bystanders, watching it happen.

I had hoped that today I would be in my constituency, which was confirmed this weekend—in the latest in a long line of similar reports—as the happiest and best place to live in the country, as today is Up Helly Aa day in Shetland, when we celebrate our Viking heritage through a fire festival and burning a boat. Unfortunately, I have to be here, not just for this debate but for other business. So, I thank you, Mr Wilson, for chairing the debate and I thank everybody else who has taken part in it. I wish you all a very happy Up Helly Aa day.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered human rights in Xinjiang.

4 pm

Sitting suspended.
John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Graham P. Jones: I would like to make some progress, please.

Bolivar’s revolution in the 1820s gave Venezuela a legacy of freedom and self-determination. Chávez and Maduro’s Bolivarian revolution in the 21st century plagued Venezuelans with destitution and dictatorship. There is no worthy comparison between the two. Some in the UK claim that Maduro’s cause is a rightful one, and the British left is aligned to that. They are wrong, and those who think that Venezuela is now subject to some right-wing coup are wrong. One is an economy of bankrupt Marxist ideas, and the Opposition represent democratic socialism.

Juan Guaidó, and his left-leaning Opposition, needs our party’s support. His party, Popular Will, is, in fact, a member of one of Labour’s sister parties in Venezuela, and a member of Socialist International, like the Labour party. It is worth stating too that the bankrupt Marxists who have ruined Venezuela over the last 20 years are not members of Socialist International and are, in my opinion, anything but socialist. They, and their fellow Marxists who propagandise about foreign interference, are wholly responsible for a bankrupt economic policy.

It is ironic that those Marxists should reject unwelcome foreign interference. Perhaps they could include their list of friends who seem to be interfering in Venezuela: Iran, Russia and Turkey, who are propping up the illegitimate, authoritarian and kleptocratic regime. It would carry more weight if they knew what they were talking about. The United States, our long term ally, has so far resisted economic sanctions, instead targeting the extreme wealth of the Chavismo politicians, some with links to drugs cartels. The US has also targeted currencies that facilitate the syphoning of Venezuela’s assets into private bank accounts.

The truth is that the “Boligarchs” of Venezuela have ensured that Venezuela’s problems will never affect their luxurious lifestyles. According to the Venezuelan news website Noticias Centro, “the late-president’s family owns 17 country estates, totalling more than 100,000 acres, in addition to liquid assets of $550 million...stored in various international bank accounts”. The Marxist hypocrisy is astonishing. Hugo Chávez said:

“Being rich is bad, it’s inhumane. This is what I say and I condemn the rich”.

He also said that “capitalism leads us straight to hell” and that “we must confront the privileged elite who have destroyed a large part of the world”.

Meanwhile, his daughter, María Gabriela Chávez, is reported to be one of the richest people in Venezuela, with a net worth of $4.2 billion. I would like to know where she got that money from.

Finally, it is worth pointing out how the US has so far resisted economic sanctions and continues to allow US companies to purchase 21% of Venezuelan crude oil, which provides the Venezuelan Government with vital overseas currency. It is a regime that is increasingly despised by a majority of its citizens, that routinely arrests, imprisons and tortures its opponents, that mismanages the economy and that profits from narco-trafficking with the cartels, with much of the result finding its way on to the streets of English towns and cities such as mine.

It is not a functioning Government in the name of the people. Speaker after speaker at the APPG has relayed their and their families’ stories of just how bad the situation is, from hunger to property theft, gun crime and the “colectivo”—the Chavismo motorbike gangs that terrorise ordinary citizens on behalf of Maduro. The rest of the international community has a duty to support the values of liberty, democracy, the rule of law and human rights, and to support the Venezuelan people at this time, not an oppressive dictatorship that ignores those values.

In the last partially free and fair elections in November 2015, the majority of the Venezuelan people voted in droves for the Opposition, and three years later those people are out on the streets protesting en masse. The biggest priority for the international community is to address a devastating consequence of Maduro’s Marxist regime: the migrant crisis—the exodus of almost 4 million people since 2014.

The Minister said yesterday that “those who have left Venezuela are in staggering numbers: well over 1 million have gone to Colombia; well over 1 million to Peru; nearly half a million each to Ecuador, Argentina and Chile; and 180,000 to Brazil. This is the biggest movement of population we have ever seen in Latin America”—[Official Report, 28 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 485].

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Graham P. Jones: I would like to make progress, thank you.

That is a direct result of an economic meltdown, a huge spike in violent crime and a climate of fear towards the authorities, who routinely kidnap and torture those who dare to speak up against the regime. Human rights groups say that Maduro’s forces have arrested more than 12,800 people for speaking up against his regime since taking power in 2013.

The Amnesty report says that the Venezuelan Government are guilty of “one of the worst human rights crisis in its history.” It says that there have been 8,292 extrajudicial executions between 2015 and 2017—an absolute totalitarian disgrace. As a result, the Organisation of American States and the Lima Group referred the Venezuelan Government to the International Criminal Court last September for crimes against humanity, citing 8,000 extrajudicial killings, 12,000 arbitrary arrests and the detention of 13,000 political prisoners. It is the first case in which an entire state has been referred to the ICC. President Macri of Argentina said in an interview with CNN:

“For me, there is no doubt: in Venezuela, human rights are systematically violated by steamrolling the opposition and everyone. There is a growing sense that we need to take more forceful action.”

The UN Human Rights Commissioner stated:

“The UN Human Rights Office understands that at least 280 individuals who had been arbitrarily deprived of their liberty for their political opinions, for exercising their human rights, or because they were perceived as a threat to the Government, remain in detention in dreadful conditions.”
[Graham P. Jones]

Given the scale of the problems, the response has been pitiful. Words have not matched actions, and refugees are suffering in horrendous circumstances. There seems to be reluctance to classify the situation as a full-on refugee crisis, perhaps because that comes with more responsibilities to act than a migrant crisis. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has referred to a “mixed flow” of migrants and refugees pouring out of the country.

I appreciate that the Minister is here today as a representative of the Foreign Office, but I say to him that more needs to be done by the Government to address the human cost of the political crisis that manifests itself not just in Venezuela, but in neighbouring countries and right across Latin America—a point I raised with the UK ambassador to Venezuela, we can see that not enough is being done.

From Ministers’ recent answers to questions on aid to Venezuela, we can see that not enough is being done. From the Minister’s responses to parliamentary questions from me, it appears that the UK spends just £10.2 million on aid through various agencies. I note that he told the United Nations last weekend:

“People are starving, children are malnourished, essential items are absent from the bare shelves of bankrupt stores. And from this wretchedness, millions have fled to seek refuge in neighbouring countries where they have been rescued by an outpouring of human generosity.”

I doubt that last point. He went on to say:

“This inexcusable and wholly avoidable wasteland…is entirely the creation of one man and his cronies.”

That contrasts sharply with a lack of commitment in his speech. At no point did the UK Government show any leadership on the refugee crisis or suggest the allocation of further resources. To put it in perspective, the UK Government give £1.6 billion to the Syrian refugee crisis, which makes £10.2 million seem insignificant.

According to the National Audit Office, only five applications have been accepted from the 79 Venezuelans who have sought political asylum in the UK since Maduro took power in 2013. We must do more and recognise the crisis for what it is.

Last year, Channel 4’s Krishnan Guru-Murthy went to the border between Venezuela and Colombia to report the experiences of the thousands of people who attempt to cross it every day. The conditions he found were terrible: rivers were crossed on foot, armed gangs constantly patrolled the streets, and the Colombian army was at the border. The area is littered with narcos; the UK Government advice is not to go to those areas.

The huddled masses in his film were not optimistic about the future. They come to London to learn about the Westminster system, and to learn about democracy. Some of them have risked their own safety and that of their allies by leaving the country and re-entering it when they return. Their bravery is a testament to their belief that, one day, freedom and democracy will rule once again in their country.

As I mentioned, this debate comes after the unconstitutional presidential election in Venezuela last year. The election process was rightly criticised by every country with a functioning democracy. Polling stations in areas of high opposition were closed, and food coupons were given away at others. There were counting irregularities, and people were intimidated in the streets by Maduro and his supporters. It is no wonder that many countries, including the UK, did not recognise the Maduro victory as legitimate. Let us not forget the British company Smartmatic, which provided the software that was used in the 2017 Constituent Assembly election. When it came back to the UK, Smartmatic said that the elections results had been “tampered with”. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, stated that the election “does not in any way fulfil minimal conditions for free and credible elections.”

It is important to thank Members of all parties who have turned up today to engage in this debate, and I look forward to listening to their contributions. There is consensus among almost everyone, but sadly there are malign individuals for whom the Venezuelan people are no consideration. As I said yesterday in the House, it is vital that the UK Government, who have yet to step up to the plate and do what Britain does best—caring for those in need—begin to put together an international response that meets the scale of the crisis. This is foremost a human catastrophe: human beings, particularly children, are experiencing inordinate suffering. If there is one closing thought, let it be of the children of this or any other refugee crisis, who are suffering tonight and going forward.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than eight minutes past 5. The guideline limits are five minutes for
the SNP and for Her Majesty’s Opposition, and 10 minutes for the Minister. Mr Graham Jones then gets two minutes to sum up the debate at the end. Seven Back-Benchers seek to contribute within 18 minutes, so there has to be a two-and-a-half-minute limit. I call Mark Menzies.

4.49 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. It is with great pleasure, but with some sadness, that I rise to support the words of my friend, the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones). As chair of the APPG on Venezuela, he knows only too well the issues that the people of Venezuela face. He has covered much territory and time is short, so I will keep my words focused on the impact on the people of Venezuela, as a side-effect of the economic crisis and political corruption there.

I speak in my capacity as chairman of the APPG on Latin America and not in my capacity as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Colombia, Argentina or Peru, or any other governmental role. I mention those roles because, by going to Colombia, I have seen at first hand the misery of hundreds of thousands of people who have had their normal lives, dignity, and good prospects torn from them, by no fault of their own.

There is no sight more heart-breaking than the one I saw when I went to Barranquilla and Santa Marta in Easter last year. I saw women with children begging by the roadside, in the morning, to be taken by men, in order to get money to see them through the day. No greater humiliation can befall any individual. I saw professionals washing car windows. On the whole, those people are not there to beg, but to survive. They will do whatever they can, and they are the lucky ones.

The unlucky ones are those who are still in Venezuela and who have no medicine. Forget complex cases; if someone is diabetic or HIV-positive, at the moment, they are simply counting down the days to their death because they cannot access treatment or basic healthcare in hospitals. Some 90% of urgent care in Venezuelan hospitals has gone. At the end of last year, Channel 4 produced the documentary, Unreported World, which was one of the most powerful pieces that I have seen.

In the time I have left, I urge the Minister to work with the Lima Group. Let us ensure that we capacity-build for the Venezuelan refugees in Colombia, and that we work with Colombia to look after those people, because by goodness, they deserve better than what they are getting at the moment.

4.52 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) on securing it. This is an issue on which I have been vocal. It is incomprehensible that democracy is so vaunted but much of the world remains silent. Yet again, I am thankful that this House—the home and foundation of democracy—has not remained silent, and neither has the Minister. He too has been vocal—well done to him, as I said yesterday and say again today.

The Venezuelan Government decided to go ahead with presidential elections without instigating any of the reforms of the electoral system that the Opposition had requested. The Opposition candidates did not participate and claimed that there was widespread fraud, for which there is evidence. The UK, along with the EU, the US and the 14 members of the Lima Group to which the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) referred, has refused to recognise the result as legitimate, and with good reason. I was very shocked to read in the news on Sunday night that a teacher’s salary in Venezuela will currently buy only 12 eggs. What does she have to offer to her family and friends? There must be a swift resolution, and it is past time that we in the UN stopped hand-wringing and began to take action to help the people of Venezuela.

More specifically, the army is believed to be targeting political opponents, and the everyday person lives in fear. That is the kind of regime to which we are diametrically opposed, and the causes of democracy and freedom scream out that we put action behind words and do all that is possible to help in this scenario. The army has killed, injured, beaten, tortured and raped. I believe that it must be held accountable for its actions.

There are supposed champions of human rights whose brand of human rights murders on one hand but battles against supposed slights to human rights on the other. As usual, I will not follow the myopic trail of Sinn Féin, who are attempting to support someone who can only be called a despot, and were one of the first political parties in the United Kingdom to do so. We must do what we know to be right and support the calls for intervention.

Our intention is to do what we should for those who cannot stand alone. If we believe that there must be an interim President, will we offer advice and support? I hope that we will. If we believe that the currency issue must be rectified, will we offer advice and help? Do we have aid to help those who are working, yet are literally starving day by day as the world watches? This Government, this House and the people of this country will not stand idly by. We will do all we can to help. I ask the Minister to let us do everything that we can to help democracy and freedom.

4.54 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) for securing the debate. I speak as vice-chair of the APPG on Venezuela. I have been following the escalation of events closely for some time and have a deep personal interest in them.

In December last year, I sent letters to the Governor of the Bank of England and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, urging them to be more transparent on the £500 million of gold belonging to the Venezuelan people that is held by the Bank of England. In my letters, I sought reassurance over reports that the Venezuelan Minister of Finance, Simón Zerpa, who had been sanctioned by the US Treasury, and Calixto Sánchez, the illegitimate president of the Venezuelan central bank, had met Bank of England officials and were seeking to take the gold away. Unfortunately, the reply I received from the Bank of England hid behind references to “individual customer relationships” and “customer confidentiality”, rather than directly addressing my concerns.

Two weeks ago, I met the Economic Secretary to the Treasury to express my concerns about the situation in Venezuela, the illegitimate nature of the Government...
and the importance of ensuring that the dictatorship does not get custody of the gold—we all know what it would do with it. He undertook to repeat my concerns to the Bank of England. I thank him and Foreign Office Ministers for their reassurances as the situation has moved on. I understand that the Bank has independence from Government, but it is a pillar of the state and it is 100% owned by the state, so it is reasonable to expect a high standard from it.

For a while, protests in Venezuela had died down, as a consequence of the sheer exhaustion of the country’s hungry and abused citizens. Juan Guaidó has managed to resurrect democratic voices, gather a strong Opposition—left and right—to Maduro’s autocratic Government, and offer a real chance of change. Maduro has been financially rewarding the military for its loyalty, making it harder for his regime to be overthrown.

As the UK has declared its support for Guaidó, I urge the Government to continue to be forthright with the Bank of England and not allow it to misuse its independence or to cite “customer confidentiality” in an inappropriate fashion. The hon. Member for Hyndburn expressed the bigger picture brilliantly and bravely. Although I understand the political situation for him does not make that particularly welcome, I still think he needs to be congratulated.

4.57 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): In September 2017, I had a heart-breaking meeting with the Venezuelan community in my constituency. I subsequently came to this Chamber to raise the desperate realities faced by their friends and families. Eighteen months on, the economic and humanitarian crisis that they face has soared to unprecedented and simply frightening levels.

I will communicate to the House just two cases that I have been contacted about today. I was contacted by my constituent Erika, who is struggling to support her family back in Venezuela. Sadly, Erika’s sister was diagnosed with cancer four years ago, but has been unable to receive any treatment for the last two years because of the cost and the lack of medicine. I will quote from Erika’s incredibly upsetting email. She said:

“We are not talking about trivial stuff. We are talking about life or death situations. When you need to decide which one of your family members is the one who is going to eat today. If my parents get ill at the same time, my sister may be in the position of choosing which one is going to survive.”

I also heard from local resident Milita. Her brother is a doctor with over 20 years’ experience and a private practice. The Venezuelan economy is in such disarray, however, that he cannot charge more than $1 per patient visit. That solitary dollar gets paid three months later by an insurance company, with an inflation rate of over 1,000,000%. By the time it reaches him, it is almost worthless. His clinic has been robbed twice; his staff held at gunpoint; and his machinery stolen. Over 80% of his patients have lost a minimum of 8 kg since their previous visit, and can no longer afford to attend their regular check-ups.

This House and this country can no longer ignore the situation facing Venezuela. Democracy was breached by the illegitimate Constituent Assembly, and Nicolás Maduro is clearly not the legitimate leader of Venezuela. This is a regime that must be condemned loud and clear.

4.59 pm

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): This is an important debate to me. Yesterday, I was not able to make the main Chamber for the urgent question from the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), so I am incredibly grateful to the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) not only for making a superb and comprehensive speech, every part of which I agreed with and which warrants all our congratulations, but for giving me the chance to say what I was not able to say yesterday.

I come to the debate from three different perspectives: as a citizen of the world, with a lot of us seeing this appalling tragedy, one of the biggest in the world and with the potential to become much worse, as hugely worrying; as a citizen of the UK, which has a good international aid reputation, although South America perhaps does not attract quite the international aid focus that it warrants; and in the interests of Colombia, because of family connections and my work with the all-party group, which is particularly important. The scale of the crisis is shocking.

For three weeks in August, during the summer holidays, I visited Colombia. It was shocking to see Venezuelans, with all their possessions, just walking from Venezuela to Bogotá or even Boyacá, where I spent several weeks. They came in twos and threes, on the backs of lorries with all their possessions. It was incredibly sad.

I have one or two important points to make in the short time I have available. One is that we should recognise the way in which Colombia and other countries have behaved towards the refugees. It is a lesson to the world. Colombia has accepted 1.1 million refugees, registering them and allowing them to get jobs. It is an absolutely brilliant way for a country to deal with refugees. We should be incredibly proud of them for that.

In fact, I will leave it at that. I will have to look for another opportunity to say all the things that I would like to say.

5.2 pm

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): There is undoubtedly a crisis in Venezuela, but I am afraid that what we have heard today has been something of a caricature of the situation there. Clearly, the severe crisis affecting the people of Venezuela has been exacerbated by sanctions imposed by the United States of America—[Interruption]—from Barack Obama in 2015 onwards. That has led to the very real shortages to which hon. Members have referred, in spare parts, medical supplies, food and so on, exacerbated by economic sabotage by elites in Venezuela—[Interruption.]

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. There is to be no noise from the Public Gallery, or it will be cleared. This is Parliament and everyone has a right to be heard without interference.
Chris Williamson: Thank you very much, Mr Hollobone. The UN rapporteur, the first to visit Venezuela in 21 years, clearly said that the US sanctions were illegal and could amount to crimes against humanity.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Williamson: No, I am afraid not; we do not have the time.

The rapporteur said that the US was waging “economic warfare” against the people of Venezuela. It is also important to challenge on the record the assertion about the election being rigged. I have spoken to election observers who were there, and they said that although the election process was not perfect, it was not rigged—it is impossible to stuff ballot boxes with ballot papers because each vote is twinned with the voter ID and fingerprint of each elector who votes in a Venezuelan election. A Member of this House, the hon. Member for South Down (Chris Hazzard), has said that it was complete rubbish to suggest that the Opposition were not allowed to campaign, because he saw them doing so openly during the election process.

We have seen this all before, have we not? Manufactured shortages and the intervention of the United States—we saw that in Chile, and we have seen similar influences in Honduras and other Latin American countries. It never ends well. Surely what the UK should be doing, rather than acting as Donald Trump’s poodle, is calling on the Maduro regime to London, inviting them to return to Venezuela? That is a list of concrete steps that one would expect the Government to take. I assume that some of that will be in anticipation of there being no response to the Government and the EU’s collective position on the need for a new electoral mandate for the President.

I also want to reinforce the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) about the gold held by the Bank of England. My right hon. Friend the Minister got rather a good write-up in the Telegraph today, but I have to say that I do not think that it was entirely deserved, because I think he should have been significantly tougher with the signal he sent the Bank of England about the position of the Government on that gold.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches. The guideline limits are five minutes for the SNP, five minutes for Labour and 10 minutes for the Minister.

5.7 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) for securing an important, timely and incredibly factual debate.

As we have heard, the political and economic crisis in Venezuela is spiralling into an economic and humanitarian disaster. Schools are being closed, and hunger is killing Venezuelan children at an alarming rate as stores have run out of food. The country’s hospitals are collapsing under chronic shortages of antibiotics, food and other supplies, and diseases such as malaria and diphtheria have re-emerged. The United Nations has estimated that as many as 3 million citizens—a tenth of Venezuela’s population—have fled since 2015. Almost 90% of those who remain live in poverty. In recent days, the desperate conditions have led to thousands protesting on the capital’s streets in a bid to topple President Nicolás Maduro. Amnesty International has reported that more than a dozen people have been killed in the protests in the past week alone.

Maduro and his Government have overseen Venezuela’s collapse, and yet have maintained a tight grip on power. Last year, Maduro won a widely criticized re-election, with reports of coercion, fraud and electoral rigging. The roots of the crisis lie in the country’s political corruption and economic mismanagement, and a complex combination of short and long-term factors. Venezuela holds the world’s largest supply of crude oil, which has been an essential part of its economy. However, plummeting oil prices in 2016 triggered an economic implosion, and the oil-dependent country lapsed into political turmoil and economic misery.

The economic crisis has been decades in the making, but Maduro has presided over its acceleration. There can be no excuse made for him and his Government. Now, as the parliamentary chief Juan Guaidó has declared himself the interim President, Venezuelans find themselves with two declared leaders, unrest in the streets and...
Between 2012 and 2016, the oil price collapsed. That was a problem, but mismanagement by the Government compounded it, leading to massive inflation and the collapse of the currency. None of that excuses the Maduro Government’s abysmal human rights and political failings. Amnesty reports excessive use of force against demonstrators and torture of detainees. I believe the May 2018 elections were rigged by the Government and, following serious intimidation, boycotted by the Opposition. It is not surprising, therefore, that they were not recognised by the Lima Group of neighbouring states.

The Venezuelan people should not be a battleground for other countries’ ideological differences. Their welfare and well-being should be at the forefront of our minds. Free and fair elections are the priority. Dialogue and respect for human rights, rather than violence, are essential. Humanitarian support for refugees is needed, rather than the further sanctions announced by the Trump Administration overnight.

Given the rising death toll from the latest protests, does the Minister agree that the Maduro Government must respect the rule of law and move to elections? I note his carefully chosen words in the Chamber yesterday: “Juan Guaidó is the right man to take Venezuela forward and that we will recognise him as constitutional interim President if new elections are not announced within eight days.”—[Official Report, 28 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 481.]

That will be 3 February. Usual practice is to recognise whoever is in charge in a country, rather than who we would like to be in charge. The Lima Group is just as concerned as the EU; it has called for elections but has not issued an ultimatum. If Nicolás Maduro does not announce elections, and is still sitting in the presidential palace, supported by the army, on 3 February, what will the UK and EU Governments do? How does the Minister see this situation unfolding?

As Chair of the International Development Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) said yesterday that the history of US intervention in Latin America is “tragic and troubled”. We all heard Donald Trump last week say that all options are on the table. Indeed, the Minister used similar language in October. John Bolton tweeted a note that said, “5,000 troops to Colombia”. The Colombian Government have not been consulted about that; their Foreign Affairs Minister issued a statement saying that an invasion from Colombia is absolutely out of the question.

Will the Minister give us some clarity? Do the UK and the President of the United States include in their list of all options the possibility of military intervention in Venezuela? Have the British Government discussed that with the American Government, and has the UK promised support in the event that the US takes action? Her Majesty’s Opposition would like military intervention to be ruled out.

We all appreciate the huge challenges for neighbouring countries of dealing with the influx of refugees from Venezuela, especially in Colombia, so will the Minister tell us what efforts are being made to ensure that those refugees receive the humanitarian support they need? Will he answer the questions on asylum that my hon. Friend has asked?

Yesterday, the Father of the House said that we should not impose further economic sanctions; overnight, the Trump Administration did just that. Instead, will
the Minister use the Magnitsky powers that we gave him several months ago, and impose targeted sanctions against those who are abusing human rights?

5.17 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) for securing this debate. I thank him and his many colleagues for their continued interest in and support for Venezuela. I congratulate him on his re-appointment in October as chair of the all-party parliamentary group. However, I very much regret that I am unable to use such a welcoming tone for the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson). He has become a defender of the indefensible, a champion of someone who has impoverished his people, and a supporter of someone who has smashed the rule of law and usurped the constitution. I rather sense that he wants to make himself the most hated man in Venezuela. It is perhaps a race between whether he becomes so there, and whether he establishes that reputation in this House first.

Let me make no bones about it: Venezuela is a failing state in the midst of the deepest man-made economic and humanitarian crisis in modern Latin American history.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will make some progress, but if I have time, I will give way later.

When I spoke about Venezuela at Chatham House in October, I described the demise of a once vibrant nation, charting, for the benefit of the hon. Member for Derby North, the many decisions that had been taken to prove that this was a Chavista-made crisis and not a US one. Since then we have seen no improvement; in fact, the situation has gone from bad to worse. The social implications are astonishing: four-fifths of Venezuelans are living in poverty. They are vulnerable to malnutrition and disease because of shortages of food and medicines. The poor are not just poorer—they are destitute. More than 3 million people have been driven to leave the country—10% of the population. In the UK, that would equate to almost the entire population of London. That massive exodus puts enormous pressure on neighbouring states, particularly Colombia, Peru and Ecuador. We applaud the remarkable generosity towards Venezuelan migrants of those countries, and that of Brazil and other countries in the region.

As well as punishing his own people, Maduro has damaged Venezuela’s reputation and relations in the region and the wider international community. Instead of diplomacy, he has chosen confrontation. He has deliberately sought confrontation through reckless border incursions by the Venezuelan security forces. He has cut-off any means of diplomatic engagement, including by announcing Venezuela’s withdrawal from the Organisation of American States in 2017, and his conduct inexcusably threatens the peace process in neighbouring Colombia.

Under the Maduro regime Venezuela’s democratic institutions, including the judiciary, the national electoral authorities and local government, have been systematically undermined, while political repression and electoral malpractice have increased. The creation of an all-powerful Constituent Assembly in August 2017 was clearly a deliberate attempt to neutralise the democratically elected National Assembly. Over the past two years, election after election has been manipulated, culminating in a presidential election in May 2018 that few apart from the Government themselves considered free and fair. At Saturday’s United Nations Security Council meeting, which I attended, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Arreaza waved a copy of, and spoke passionately about, the constitution, yet it is Maduro who has trashed that constitution and Juan Guaidó who has upheld it.

The political Opposition have been suppressed and intimidated, their leaders have fled or been imprisoned, and we will never forget that the Opposition activist Fernando Albán was detained and then found dead beneath the windows of the national intelligence facility. Some leading Opposition leaders have been imprisoned, forced into exile or banned from holding public office. Maduro has cynically used his control of supposedly independent institutions such as the Supreme Court and the National Electoral Council to cement his position. There was global criticism of the May 2018 presidential elections, with allegations of electoral malpractice and the banning of Opposition parties.

Those actions, along with the recent brutal suppression of demonstrations in Venezuela, are symptoms of an increasingly intolerant Government turning to repression simply to cling on to power. Ironically, Maduro’s re-inauguration on 10 January might just have been a catalyst for change, but a clumsy attempt to intimidate the new president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, by temporarily detaining him backfired spectacularly.

We know what has happened recently. During an Opposition protest on 23 January, Guaidó declared the May 2018 presidential elections fraudulent—and they were. Citing article 233 of the Venezuelan constitution, he declared himself interim President of Venezuela, and he was swiftly recognised by the United States and 12 Lima Group countries. As of this moment, 22 countries have recognised him as the interim President.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: Very briefly.

John Spellar: If we get Juan Guaidó as the full, proper President, he will still need to reconstruct the economy, which has been wasted by the Maduro regime. Will the Minister look again at my suggestion yesterday that we need a Marshall plan to get Venezuela’s resources up and running as quickly as possible so that it can, like post-war Europe, sustain itself?

Sir Alan Duncan: One of the blessings of Venezuela is that it has resources; its tragedy is that they have been exploited and destroyed by Maduro and his cronies. The right hon. Gentleman is right. We will look at anything to try to get those resources serving the needs of Venezuelans, who I hope will be able to return in their hundreds of thousands, if not their millions, to the country they have fled.

As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said in Washington on 24 January, the UK believes that Maduro is not the legitimate leader of Venezuela, and that Guaidó...
[Sir Alan Duncan] is the right person to take Venezuela forward. As I said at the UN Security Council meeting on Saturday, we will recognise Guaidó as constitutional interim President if new elections are not announced within eight days of that meeting. The sorts of actions called for by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) will be addressed then, as we assess what needs to be done after the world comes together, as I hope it does, to point out and act on the fact that Maduro is not the legitimate President of Venezuela.

Crispin Blunt: That deadline expires on Sunday, I think. Will my right hon. Friend lay a written ministerial statement on Monday to say exactly what measures the Government are taking?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am not going to make a commitment about what precise reaction we will make in terms of procedures in the House. As my hon. Friend appreciates, that is a matter for the usual channels.

Melanie Onn: The Minister mentioned that he accepts that Venezuela is in a state of crisis. If that is the case and that is the Government’s position, why are they wasting taxpayers’ money on trying repeatedly to appeal the asylum claim of my 73-year-old constituent Nelly Gelves, which was approved by a tribunal? Is it their intention to send her back to Venezuela while it is in that state of crisis?

Sir Alan Duncan: As the hon. Lady will well appreciate, asylum is a semi-judicial process that is handled by the Home Office. I regret that I am unfamiliar with that case and she did not notify me of it in advance of the debate, so I did not ask the appropriate questions in advance.

In addition to what I have described, the UK stands with Spain, France, Germany and the Netherlands in demanding the announcement of urgent free and fair elections within six days, and in calling for a legitimate Government to be established. We stand with the Organisation of American States and the Lima Group, whose members last September referred the Venezuelan Government to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the United States in saying that the National Assembly and its president, Juan Guaidó, are best placed to lead Venezuela to the restoration of its democracy, its economy and its freedom.

Helen Goodman: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have no more time, I am afraid. I have to leave the hon. Member for Hyndburn a couple of minutes at the end.

Today, we should all stand together against the tyranny of Nicolás Maduro and in support of the legitimate democratic forces in Venezuela. Venezuela can and must recover from the depths of its current despair. To do so, it needs an end to tyranny, an end to corruption and an urgent return to freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

5.27 pm

Graham P. Jones: This has been a very worthwhile debate, and the contributions by nearly all Members were exceedingly valid. I hope the Minister reflects on the questions that Members asked and provides some sort of response to them. I think that would prove worthwhile. This issue appears not to be going away. In fact, it may deteriorate somewhat; we ought to be mindful that the crisis may become even bigger in the coming days, weeks and months.

We must think immediately about the people who are suffering. Yes, there is a political question—yes, there is a bankrupt Marxist Administration running the country down—but right now, as the vice-chair of the APPG on Venezuela, the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), said, there is a humanitarian catastrophe. We simply are not putting enough resources in. I am not backing away from attacking the failed Marxist regime, but the people who are suffering should be paramount in our thoughts tonight, this week and next week. We should all take away the experiences that the hon. Gentleman recounted as our lasting memory of this debate. I say in summary that the contribution from the UK Government needs to increase dramatically.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the political situation in Venezuela.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 30 January 2019

[Geraint Davies in the Chair]

Early Parenthood: Supporting Fathers

9.30 am

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered supporting fathers in early parenthood.

As always, Mr Davies, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I hope you will forgive me if I make any minor procedural errors; it has been a while since I have been on the Back Benches of the Westminster Hall Chamber, rather than closer to the wise counsel of the Chair.

I begin with two quick disclaimers. First, although my debate is about supporting fathers in early parenthood, I am extremely conscious that there is still much to do to combat inequality during maternity. I am an avid follower of Maternity Action and support many of its campaigns, some of which I know are making good progress. Secondly, this debate is not meant as a dismissal of the wonderful mums out there who are single or in same-sex couples. It is not about mums versus dads, nor same-sex couples. It is not about mums versus dads, nor.

I want to address three points: perinatal support, loneliness in new dads, and shared parental leave. The first comes wholly under the Department of Health and Social Care; the second does partially; the third might not, but it is important to the debate because it relates to the overall wellbeing of our children.

In December, the Centre for Social Justice published a really interesting report, “Testing Times: Supporting fathers during the perinatal period and early parenthood”. It looked in detail at written evidence submitted to the Select Committee on Health and Social Care inquiry into the first 1,000 days of life by the Fatherhood Institute, which described support for fathers as “toothless” and noted criticisms that within health services, “well-meaning…father-inclusive policy-making…has been more rhetoric than reality”.

On the back of those comments, the CSJ did some additional polling. It found that seven in 10 new fathers “were made to feel like a ‘spare part’”, six in 10 said that they had “had no conversations at all with a midwife about their role”, and nearly half said that they had “received little or no advice at all…on their role as a dad.” However, it also found that “more than 9 in 10 are present ‘at the scans and the birth’” and that there is “strong correlation between active father engagement and improved childhood outcomes.”

That is a recurring theme in a really interesting book on equal parenting co-authored by one of our own lobby journalists, James Millar. It includes several quotations from the 2015 UN-backed report, “State of the World’s Fathers”, about how engagement in the first year of a baby’s life is good for the dad as well as the baby. Substantial and high-quality father involvement can encourage a child’s positive social interaction and lead to higher cognitive development scores.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing a debate on this important issue. It is hardly surprising that so many dads feel left out when the NHS guidance refers to them not as fathers or dads but as “birthing partners”. Perinatal depression in mums is linked to depression in teenagers: there is a 99% likelihood that a 16-year-old suffering from depression had a mother with perinatal mental health problems, including depression. What is overlooked is that 20% of fathers also experience perinatal mental health problems, which has a big influence on their parenting skills and on their engagement with and attachment to their own children. We need to do more about that.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. I saw those statistics while researching my speech; perhaps the Minister’s reply will describe her Department’s work on post-natal depression for mums and dads. I do not have time to cover everything, but I agree that language is incredibly important. I appreciate that the term “birthing partners” is used in order not to cause offence, because our society and how we bring up children are very different now, but it is important that we think about the language and make our communication with fathers as inclusive as possible.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way so early in her speech. She is making a fantastic return to Westminster Hall from the dizzying heights; she is a principled person and we on the Opposition Benches all love her.

The hon. Lady mentions challenges. Is she aware of Dads House, which does all sorts of things to represent single dads? There are 400,000 single-parent families headed up by dads, which is 13.7% of all single-parent families. Dads House has its own food bank and does buddying, breakfast clubs and football—a sport that is close to the hon. Lady’s heart. Would she be interested in meeting members of the group? In fact, everyone in this House has a good opportunity to meet them, because after Prime Minister’s questions on 20 March they are coming to Speaker’s House for a reception with the all-party parliamentary group on single parent families—and all hon. Members are invited. The group does great work.

Tracey Crouch: I would love to come. Single parents play an incredibly important role, but for various reasons they are often maligned. Meeting single dads who are doing their very best, in whatever circumstances they find themselves bringing up their children, is an incredibly important part of that conversation. I would be delighted to come to the event on 20 March.
Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Was she struck, as I was, by the statistic cited in the CSJ report that “95 per cent of births in the UK are to couples...with 85 per cent of these parents living together”? Far more needs to be done to encourage and support the family and the community at that stage, to help improve life chances.

Tracey Crouch: I did see that interesting statistic. I do not want to get into the details of family make-up in a modern society, because I do not want us to inadvertently criticise those who are not in such relationships—it is important that we respect different family make-ups. The point that I wish to raise today is about fathers and the role that they play.

The excellent book on equal parenting co-authored by James Millar notes the “State of the World’s Fathers” report’s finding that “fathers who report close, non-violent connections with their children live longer, have fewer mental or physical health problems...and report being happier than fathers who do not report this connection”.

Given the well-understood positive outcomes of fathers’ engagement in their children’s development, it is only right that we should have the infrastructure and systems in place to support them. As the CSJ report states, we need to collect more data at the point of birth to get a better understanding of participation by fathers, but also identify “cold spots” for investment in supporting father engagement.

We definitely need to be a bit more dad-friendly in our language and correspondence about children’s healthcare. I agree with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children that a “dad check” would be a valuable way for our health services to ensure that resources are open and accessible to new fathers. I also agree with the recommendation that NHS England should roll out schemes that increase support to fathers. That support should include either creating a new fatherhood fund or making the maternity challenge fund a general parental support fund and putting in additional investment.

The CSJ makes commendable recommendations for the Department of Health and Social Care to improve inspection frameworks, develop a dad test for the perinatal period and extend the reach of digital communications for new fathers. Those all seem sensible ideas; I accept them and extend the reach of digital communications for new fathers. Those all seem sensible ideas; I accept them and also identify “cold spots” for investment in supporting father engagement.

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Chris Elmore: One reason why I wanted to hold this debate is that I feel it is hard for male colleagues to raise the subject. As a mother, I know that if my other half had come to me and said, “I am feeling a bit down,” I would have said, “But you didn’t give birth to the child!” For many years, we have forgotten that it is very much about a partnership. There are many issues that mothers still face—there are still huge issues around discrimination in maternity and everything else—but that must not mean that we forget the issues that fathers face, and that is why this is an important debate.

I completely understand why male colleagues might not have felt comfortable in raising this issue, because they may well feel that they would be accused of forgetting all the other issues around maternity discrimination. I feel very honoured to be raising it on behalf of all the dads out there. Perhaps I can talk about it with more ease.

The constituent of the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) is doing a brilliant job in raising the issue of men’s mental health, post-baby. It is important that we do that. If that equates to having more training, that is what must happen, although I am always loth to say that our hard-working health professionals need any more training than they already get. They have a very important job to do, and by and large they are all doing it brilliantly.

One aspect of parenthood that can impact on wellbeing is loneliness. When Jo Cox stood in the Chamber and spoke of her own challenges with loneliness, including the example of becoming a mother, she widened discussion...
on the subject. I, too, had my own brushes with maternity-leave loneliness. While the rest of the world here was discussing the referendum campaigns, I was on maternity leave. I dealt with that by going to the supermarket every day, just for a chat.

For new fathers, it can be harder. When my other half took his three months shared parenting leave, he felt isolated from baby groups, as many were either branded “mother and baby” or were predominantly made up of mums, making him feel less inclined to go in. There are excellent apps connecting mums, such as Mush, which we profiled in the loneliness strategy, as did the CSJ in its report, but there are hardly any dad apps set up to connect full-time fathers. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, with his digital background, may be interested in upscoaling that from a health perspective.

The loneliness strategy, which I was privileged to publish on behalf of the Government in October 2018, specifically, on my request, used an infographic of a dad pushing a baby to highlight becoming a parent as a trigger for loneliness while at the same time reflecting that it is not a gender issue. The more we all acknowledge loneliness as an issue, the quicker we will reduce the stigma and instead create connections that help to combat it. I was pleased that the Department of Health and Social Care was a core partner in the delivery of the strategy.

The CSJ noted that children’s centres are a key part of delivering opportunities for dads to connect, and that many were not doing so, despite its being a legal requirement. I know that children’s centres are a politically contentious issue because of funding and I would hate the debate to be bogged down by that, but the centres in my constituency, some of which have restructured, could play an enormously important role in creating support networks for dads. It is a shame that because of funding pressures, gaps in services are occurring.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The problem with the children’s centres—a fantastic asset—at the moment is that they are closed most of the time when dads can access them, particularly at weekends. Some of the best children’s centres are those that open at weekends, have football teams that dads and their children can come along to, and have computer-reading facilities latched on to that. It is a way of getting dads into the children’s centres. The centres need to be used much more at weekends and outside of working times when many fathers cannot access them.

Tracey Crouch: I agree with my hon. Friend, but it is very important that we do not fall into the trap of talking about dads as weekend parents. The point of the debate is to discuss how society has evolved; there is a lot more equal parenting. I completely understand his point. I shall come on to talk about shared parenting. The take-up of shared parenting is so low that many fathers can play that meaningful role in parenting only at weekends, so we would want those services to be open. Children’s centres have an incredibly important role, which is not just about creating a connection, but also about, for example, trying to break the cycle in domestic abuse. They play a fundamental role. I know that the Stefanou Foundation is doing some excellent work in supporting such initiatives.

I accept that my own experience is based on good fortune, and that it could easily be criticised as coming from a comfortably-off middle-class professional, but when we need to do so much more on shared parenting than we do at the moment. We lag very far behind other countries on shared parenting, particularly Scandinavian countries.

What I see from my other half taking shared parenting is a very special bond between him and our son. Sadly, there are still a significant number of men who are ineligible for parental leave, and for those that are eligible there is a financial disincentive to take it. The Fawcett Society found that nearly seven in 10 people believed that men who took time off work to look after a baby should be entitled to the same pay and amount of leave as women. In Germany, fathers on leave are paid two thirds of their salary and in Sweden it is 80% of their income. Here it is £145 per week. We managed because I am paid well, but an average or low-income family would inevitably struggle, so while many might want to, it is unsurprising that take-up of parental leave is so low.

I know that much work is being undertaken to improve the situation. I thought the speeches in our debate on proxy voting on Monday evening encouraging male colleagues to take shared parenting leave were really helpful, and we could set an example in this place. I commented earlier on the wider societal and health benefits of a father’s meaningful engagement in the upbringing of a child. To me, doing more to improve our shared parenting policies is a no-brainer.

There is so much more I could have spoken about this morning, including the emerging organisations that help support fathers, such as workingdads.co.uk, which seeks employment with flexible, child-friendly hours, and the really funny social media accounts, such as Man vs. Baby, which might make light of some of the challenges that fathers face but also highlights that they exist in the first place. Ultimately, if we accept that meaningful fatherly engagement with their children is good for the health and wellbeing not just of the child but of the dad, making sure that we provide the infrastructure to support them, from neonatal to perinatal and beyond, is simply common sense, fair and equal—good economics but also really good politics.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. We have six speakers, which with my maths makes about six minutes each. I would like to introduce an advisory limit of six minutes. As with the EU referendum, it is not mandatory, but I strongly advise it. I invite Paul Masterton to start.

9.49 am

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on securing this debate, and I thank her for her support for new MPs who are also fairly new dads. I very much valued the advice that she gave to me in conversations in the Tea Room in my early days here, as I tried to struggle with the largely impossible balance of being an MP and having a young family.

I will touch on a few things from my own experience as a dad of two under-fives. Both my kids were born between midnight and 2 am. It is quite difficult, about
90 minutes after a child is born, for a father to have his wife and child go to the maternity ward while he is simply waved off to drive home. I am lucky; I live about 20 minutes from the hospital, the roads are good, and both my kids were born in May. Lots of dads will drive home in very difficult conditions and will be mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted. Would it not be nice if dads could spend a bit more time on the maternity ward in those early days? It sets much of the tone for how dads feel in those early months—as if they are one step removed from everything that is going on around them.

After I went back to work, my two overriding emotions were guilt and jealousy, neither of which are very healthy. I felt guilty that my wife had to do all the legwork, and jealousy of the fact that she was spending all the time with the kids. I really welcome all the stuff that is being introduced by NHS England—and now also up in Scotland—to try to include dads more in those early parts of the services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford said, things are quite good on the pre-birth element. Dads go along to the scans and classes, but then they are just chucked to the side in a lot of ways. We need to involve dads much more.

A lot of the support groups are very helpful. I always used to try to get away from work as early as possible and rush home, and I wanted to do loads when I got home. My wife used to say to me, “Well, no, actually. I need you to be the best version of yourself, so don’t feel guilty about getting a good night’s sleep. Don’t feel guilty about going to the pub or seeing your friends, because if you’re in a better frame of mind and feeling better, then you’re a better support for me.” It is important to help new dads to have that confidence in what they are doing.

The last thing I want to mention is although new dads are lots of things, they are not counsellors or trained mental health professionals. It is very difficult for a dad if he is not sure whether his partner is just feeling a bit down or whether there is something that he should be more worried about. I will never forget my wife saying to me one day when she was a bit upset, “I just feel like my world is so small and I don’t know where I stand anymore.” I did not know what to do about that or whether it was something that I should be bothered about. If I am supposed to speak to somebody, who do I speak to? The health visitor comes when I am at work, and I am not going to speak to my colleagues about it. I am not going to sit at my computer at work and type in, “Is my wife depressed?” on Google.

We should not think of support for new dads as just support for them as individuals; we should think about it as supporting new dads to support their partners better. That is the best way to ensure that kids get the best possible grounding in their early years, and to keep a strong, solid functioning family unit that is needed to give children the best start in life.
I commend some quite simple changes. A health visiting team in Lincolnshire managed to increase the participation rate of fathers in the primary birth visit from 20% to 70% by addressing their letter, “Dear new mum and dad” rather than just, “Dear parent”. That is a really simple thing and did not cost any money. It said very clearly to fathers, “We want you. You’re important and welcome. We expect and want you to turn up, and we’re here to help.” We can do some simple things that do not cost a lot of money; they just cost some political will. They are really needed, and I ask the Minister to do them.

9.59 am

Fiona Bruce (Con): Dads are good for lads—I know, because I have two boys—if only because they can share the interest of football. More seriously, it is true that fathers are good for sons in many ways. Anything we can do to support that relationship—and by we I mean the Government—we should do. I echo the respect expressed by others, which I share, for the Herculean task that single parents—most frequently, mums—do to bring up their children. Where we can, we need to look at how we can strengthen family relationships in a society where, today, over a quarter of children live with mum but not dad. More than one in seven are born into homes where there is no dad present.

The implications of that are serious; I will share a couple of sad statistics. The lack of a good male role model in young men’s lives is helping to lure them into substitute families: gangs. Apparently, most of the 50,000 or so young people caught up in county lines activities have come from homes where there has been no good role model. Similarly, 60% of the sons of men in prison are likely to end up in prison, too. That statistic is even worse if both the father and a brother are in prison—it is then a 90% likelihood.

Those are staggering statistics that show why it is so important that we and the Government try to support families more. That support is positive for children and for the wider community.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I hope that later on in her speech my hon. Friend will refer to “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, which I believe has been endorsed by more than 60 MPs and has been available to Government for over a year now. It would be good to see some of its policies championed by Government.

Fiona Bruce (Coneletic): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and I will indeed refer to it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who introduced the debate so well, referred to a CSJ report from this year. Another CSJ report, “Every Family Matters”, which was produced as long ago as July 2009, said very similar things, such as the importance of strengthening families and of having a good, strong input into a child’s life. Yet I have here an interesting statistic: 43% of unmarried parents split up before a child’s fifth birthday, but only 8% of married parents do. That is an interesting factor for us to consider: if we are looking at strengthening family life, we should not forget that supporting marriage is part of that.

Sadly, the UK has one of the highest rates of family breakdown among the 30 OECD countries. Just two thirds of children aged nought to 14 live with both parents. In the OECD countries overall, 84% of children of those ages live with both parents. Very interesting work is being done on the link between those factors and British productivity, which is 18% below the OECD average.

Tim Loughton: I admire my hon. Friend’s determination to promote marriage, but I must give a plug for my private Member’s Bill on civil partnerships, which, if it passes through the Lords, will make civil partnerships available for opposite sex couples by the end of this year. They would be an additional incentive for those couples to stay together, as overseas statistics show, particularly for the good of the children.

Fiona Bruce: It is so important that we do what we can. In the very short time that I have left, I will touch on some of the practical policies in “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, which more than 60 Members of Parliament support, and express a degree of frustration that the Government have not taken them up more practically. I know that individual Cabinet Ministers are very interested, but in order to see some real progress we need a senior Cabinet-level Minister who is responsible for drawing together the manifesto’s several policies.

I will touch on some of the manifesto’s policies on fathers. Policies 8, 9 and 11 talk about promoting the importance of active fatherhood in a child’s life. Policy 8 says:

“Maternity services should maximise opportunities to draw fathers-to-be in early.”

Policy 9 proposes that, where appropriate,

“The Government should...require all fathers to be included on birth certificates.”

Policy 11 proposes that “high quality marriage preparation” should be available at a cost-effective rate for young people thinking of getting married.

Finally, one of our key policies is the promotion of family hubs. As we have heard, children’s centres are not always as effective as they need to be. Families need support bringing up children, not just aged nought to five, but nought to 19. In the teenage years particularly, the input by fathers into their sons’ lives is often critical. We believe that it would be really positive to have family hubs in each local community, to support families at every stage of a child’s development.

I am disappointed that the Government have not taken that up more strongly. We shall continue to persevere and to press them to do so. The good news is that many local authorities have taken up those ideas very strongly and family hubs are springing up across the country. I invite colleagues to a family hubs fair, which will take place on 14 February. It is convened by Westminster City Council, which is setting up its own family hubs. The fair will flag up best practice from local authorities across the country that have set up family hubs, specifically to show how we can best support families with children. I am sure that there will be many examples of how we can best support fathers to engage in their sons’ lives, which is such an important thing on which we need to focus.
Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for securing this debate. She showed that the role of champion that she played in ministerial office has continued into what I hope will be the short period that she is on the Back Benches. I also declare an interest: I decided to speak in the debate as a learning exercise, because I will become a father for the first time in just over five weeks.

That brings me to the point on which I want to start. This House has finally moved into the 21st century, following Monday’s decision on proxy voting. It took an awful long time to get to that stage, but it was a welcome step forward. Last night, we had the first proxy vote used in Parliament. I hope to be the first male Member of Parliament to use the proxy voting system in early March.

I commend the CSJ report for a number of points that it highlighted. One of the most shocking was that only 60% of dads had no conversations at all about their role with midwives. I am one of that 60%. I have had none of those conversations at all. My wife has had excellent care with her midwife, usually when I am down in London, that I hear about on the phone or when I get home. I am one of the 60% who have had no involvement whatsoever.

I found some of the report’s other findings shocking as well. Only 25% of fathers felt that there was enough support to help them play a positive role in family life, while 60% felt emotionally unsupported when they first became a father. Similar research in Scotland, by Fathers Network Scotland, concluded that NHS Scotland—this is not a critical point, but highlights feelings across the country—is failing to provide family-centred antenatal, maternity and health visitor services. Unless we accept that there is a problem, nothing will change.

The Fatherhood Institute identifies that poor relationship quality and engagement from fathers is a key driver in post-natal depression, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford. That is surely another good reason for more involvement by father, to their own benefit and that of the mother and child, which is acknowledged by the Royal College of Midwives.

There is a local element to the issue. I was not in Parliament on Monday for the debate on proxy voting because I had stayed my constituency to attend an extremely important public meeting on our maternity services. They had been downgraded at Dr Gray’s Hospital, and we no longer have a consultant-led maternity service. A great campaign, Keep Mum, has been running for a number of months to get that service back. Although Dr Gray’s does not have a consultant-led service, a large proportion of our expectant mothers have to travel to Aberdeen to give birth—that is more than 70 miles away.

At the moment, my wife is on a green pathway, so we will not have to do that, but we might have to travel the 70 miles to Aberdeen on one of the worst roads in Scotland—the A96 across the Glens of Foudland. This morning, there is an inch of snow in Moray. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) very ably put it, a father is almost dumped after his wife has given birth, and heads home, not in a correct state of mind. What state of mind will expectant fathers be in, as they drive through snow for 70 miles to go to Aberdeen, with the mother of their child potentially giving birth in the back of their car? That is what Moray constituents have to do at the moment, which is why it is so important for us to return the Dr Gray’s maternity service to a full, consultant-led one.

I will finish with a few of the important recommendations in the CSJ report. I was surprised that one even needed to be made, and it reads

“all official correspondence relating to the care and health of a child should be addressed directly to both parents”.

It is incredible that at the moment both parents are not addressed.

I was, however, reminded of a constituency case that I am dealing with at the moment, which is extremely sad and involves a child who died shortly after birth. The mother contacted me because, when she went to register the birth of their young child, who only lived for a few hours, only one parent had the opportunity to sign the register. That tends to be the mother, who has gone in to do that. She was shocked that the father, who had been so important a part of the process, was not allowed to have an acknowledgement on the death certificate that he had a part to play in the child being born and, sadly, dying. I have written about it to the registrars in Scotland.

Another recommendation was:

“NICE should review the evidence”—
the lack of evidence—
“on...the antenatal and post-natal period and produce a single set of standards for health care professionals...on the role of fathers.”

That, too, is very important.

To follow up on the point made by the previous speaker, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), about a champion in Government, the report recommends that a Government “fatherhood champion” should be appointed. It adds that the champion should be either a “peer or senior MP”, so I am not auditioning for the role at the moment. It is, however, a very good recommendation. We see in our local authorities and the Scottish Parliament, where I used to sit, that where we have a dedicated champion, the issues are highlighted in Parliament and Members have the opportunity to express their views. A champion to drive things forward can be a positive step.

I am about to enter another exciting chapter in my family life, in five weeks’ time. Looking around at all the hon. Members speaking as fathers today, I can see that it is a bright future—they are all bright eyed and bushy tailed. I look forward to it, and I greatly appreciate the time that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) secured today to allow Parliament to discuss this important issue.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I am sure we all wish you and your wife very well.

10.12 am

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on securing it.
In my constituency, many fathers are in single-parent families or play a significant role in childcare responsibilities, and it is important to recognise the invaluable role that fathers play in bringing up their children. That is not always an easy job—I apologise to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for saying that, but he also has a lot to look forward to. Like my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), I have two children under five myself; two boys. Parenthood can be a huge challenge, but becoming a father is my proudest achievement—even more so than being elected to this place, if anyone can believe that—and something that has changed my life entirely.

In my experience, parenting support groups are aimed largely at mothers and in the early days, weeks and even years, some fathers struggle to find support networks and others in a similar position. My hon. Friends talked about the statistics and fathers feeling like a spare part during pre and post-natal discussions and services. That mirrors my experience. My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire talked about being sent home from hospital. My first son was born in the middle of the night, and I was out of the hospital within 45 minutes of that happening. I came back the next morning at 8 o’clock to be told that I would not be allowed in until visiting time at 10.30 am. Fortunately, in the end I managed to find my way in, but that is one example of the challenges.

Another example I remember is to do with breastfeeding. My first son was bottle-fed; I was involved in that, getting to feed him and connecting with him in that way. My second son was breastfed, and I felt thoroughly left out of that bonding process—in a way jealous, as my hon. Friend said, of that connection between my wife and son that I was not able to engage in. There are many examples of difficult and stressful circumstances that bring about emotions that are not necessarily helpful or healthy in that environment.

Young fathers need support. I represent the community of Mansfield, so I will highlight the particular challenges of working-class fathers, those on low incomes especially, who face the additional challenges of accessing housing or affording parental leave, for example. Mental health issues are not based on wealth or background, so we can all be susceptible to such difficulties. While it is widely acknowledged that working-class boys, for example, are likely to have lower educational attainment and fewer life chances, it is not acknowledged that their extra difficulties and challenges might extend to parenthood as well.

The added burden of a low income, trying to afford not only the cost of living but the additional costs of parenthood, is an extra stress that often falls on fathers in particular. We all know the shocking statistics on young men’s mental health, especially suicide, and the early weeks and months of having a first child in particular can be among the most stressful times in the life not only of a mother and of a father, and difficult to cope with for our own mental health and wellbeing.

Since becoming an MP, I have looked at the area of early intervention for families and children, and I took part in the family hubs debate in Westminster Hall not so long ago. It seems obvious that if families do not receive that early assistance when they first need it, instead being left to deal with the issues alone, that will come out in later life, as has been discussed. The early years challenges show themselves later on, through school, when children with mental health and behavioural problems might often come at greater cost to public services than if they had received the early intervention.

The Children’s Society has produced some pretty shocking statistics to show that in Nottinghamshire alone, 1,000 children are known to children’s services because of abuse or neglect. That figure must be brought down, and I think that we can do that by being more proactive and by providing the intervention and support services in early parenthood, with training and help for fathers as well as mothers about their roles and responsibilities and the support available to raise children.

I strongly believe that a preventive approach is the right one. In such services, we tend to deal with crises and, increasingly, those services are built around crisis management rather than proactive and preventive support. Putting an emphasis on parenthood and establishing relationships between fathers and support services has to be a priority. Trust is hugely important.

I remember the experience of a social services visit after the birth of my elder son. They sent me out of the room to get a glass of water and asked my wife if I was abusing her. That is something that they do in all circumstances—it is the right thing to do, to check that the family environment is safe for mother and baby—but I felt pretty put out. Fortunately, my wife joked about it with me afterwards.

For a young man from a difficult background, however, someone who had problems at school or has been involved with social services historically, I imagine that that could add to the feeling of being labelled and held up as a bad person, a bad character, by the services that are meant to support parents. That can add to the challenges and the stress, and is another thing that might need to be discussed more openly in terms of the challenges that might face young, low-income working-class fathers in particular.

Nottinghamshire County Council is striving to achieve more co-ordinated and multi-agency support, which is vital. The more that we can do to reduce barriers between services the better. Across the piece, there is such a challenge of competing budgets and priorities, making services more difficult to deliver. I would welcome anything that the Minister can do to bring down the barriers between local authorities and health services that always exist. For example, co-ordination and support from the health service in particular is not always there for children’s services in Nottinghamshire.

That is a particular ask I have of the Minister. Effective use of funding, catching problems early, and having early preventive services, to prevent people from spiralling into crisis—saving money on more intensive intervention later—are also vital if we are to support children, families and in particular fathers in communities such as Mansfield and throughout the country.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for securing this excellent debate. As I have tweeted, what a great group of Conservative dads are supporting the debate, although I feel slightly unhappy about speaking after three people...
who are young enough to be my children. That makes me feel a little bit old. I wanted to contribute because my early career highlights the difficulty that dads can have. I thank my first wife for being kind enough to have our children on a Saturday evening, which meant I was dismissed from the hospital, and about an hour after my children were born I was in the pub with about 30 friends and family celebrating the birth. It all turned out damned convenient for me, although having heard stories from others, I appreciate it can turn out differently.

I started life as a civil engineer, working on a building site in an obviously male dominated environment. I will not make excuses for that, but construction, particularly the very large-scale construction I was involved in, has a particular nature. The idea that I might have gone to work one day and suggested to my boss that flexible working would be a good idea, and asked whether I could come in a bit later, is incredibly difficult. By the time I was 25, I was running a building site with a gang of up to 50 blokes who would have thought I was crazy. We were on site at 7 o’clock in the morning in a process that meant that if someone did not turn up and do their job at a particular time, other people would not be able to do theirs.

Fortunately for me, I decided that working outside was too cold, and joined an American company called Cartus, where I was responsible for maintenance of the properties in its portfolio nationally. I found the world to be a completely different place. It was a much more welcoming environment with regard to flexibility in the workplace, but I may not have appreciated at the time the majority female workforce. I mention that because, in preparation for this debate, I read documents and papers from around the world, and I had not realised how difficult legislation is in America. I read a paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research, published in 2015, when a form of parental leave was just being introduced in California. The early research from that paper showed that if parental leave was introduced, fathers were more likely to be engaged in parental support, and that, interestingly, fathers are more likely to take up that parental leave for their first child or if the child is a boy.

Clearly, there is some work to be done to ensure that men do not lose interest after the first child and that they take equal interest in daughters and sons. I have one of each, and I appreciate the stress that goes with having a daughter. She seemed considerably more difficult having a son did. It is interesting that research suggests that there might be a difference in the way they are treated.

Government have a role to play, and that does not always have to cost money. We need to show intent; we need to show men that they have a role to play and that it is important in the 21st century that they play it to their fullest ability. For that not to be the case seems counterintuitive. I loved my role as a dad; in fact, I told colleagues earlier that I am ready to be a grandparent and I have made sure my children are aware of that. There is no rush, but I will be ready when they come. Indeed, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who recently gave birth, sent me a photo, which made me immediately feel paternal.

We have a role to play, but what will we do to play it? Documents have been mentioned, and “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, published more than a year ago, has some excellent ideas for Government to follow. As has been mentioned, we have a more significant male population in prison, so it is very important to ensure that men do not lose contact with their families. To reduce reoffending rates, we need to maintain that bond.

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend may not be aware that the Ministry of Justice commissioned the Farmer review, which offered 21 recommendations to strengthen the family relationships of prisoners, because there is evidence that that leads to less reoffending and keeps us all safe. The Ministry of Justice has adopted those 21 recommendations, so there has been some progress made in that area.

Eddie Hughes: It is excellent and reassuring to hear of that progress. The point was also made about the amount of maternity pay—£145.18. When I started work on a building site, I earned £50 a day, so £250 a week. Even 30 years ago, it would have been very difficult for me, as a young man starting off with a young family, to cope on a reduced income of £145, for a couple of weeks. It is great that the opportunity is there for men to take two weeks of leave, but it is important to try to make sure that is not financially difficult.

This is a complicated area, so I conclude by referring my constituents in particular to the website of the Share the Joy campaign, where they can find more details of their rights with regard to maternity and paternity leave. They can get more details about sharing parental leave up to 50 weeks, so they can take leave together and share the parenting experience very early on in their children’s lives.

10.25 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is always a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Like other Members, I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) on an excellent debate. I find coming to Westminster Hall like seeking refugee status in this place, having come out of the Chamber where there is an incredibly volatile and divided atmosphere. This debate has probably been the highlight of my week so far. We can have a debate with such consensus, and it would be better if we could do that more often. We have had an excellent debate so far. The hon. Lady kicked off by talking about perinatal depression and tackling loneliness; she made some points about shared parental leave, which I will come back to in due course.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) gave a very thoughtful and considered speech. Some of what he said resonated with me. He and I live relatively close to each other, so we share the geography of how far the hospital is. Later in my remarks I will return to the experience of having to leave the hospital very soon after the birth of a child. He spoke about the feelings of guilt and jealousy; I was walking across Westminster bridge this morning while facetiming my wife and my four-month-old daughter. As dads we feel guilt and jealousy, and he was right to place that on the record. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire
I want also to talk about my experience of becoming a dad. I think people know from my last question at Prime Minister’s questions that both my children were born prematurely and spent several weeks on the neonatal intensive care unit. One of the things I am trying to do in this place is an extension of paternity leave, particularly when a child is born prematurely. That relates to the point by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire that, whether their partner is in hospital with their child for a day or for two weeks, the fact that we just send dads home as if they were the cleaner or the cook has a massive impact on their mental health.

I experienced the same situation when my son was born three and a half years ago. He was born and whisked away to neonatal intensive care, and I was left like a spare part. The only difference this time around, when my daughter was born and we went through exactly the same thing, was that about 10 days in we had the opportunity to see a psychiatrist, or a psychologist, to have a bit of counselling. That struck me as a very good thing. I certainly got more out of it then my wife did; she is one of those typical Hebridean women who is very strong—much stronger than me. It struck me as a bit unusual that we were offered that experience; it is only now, after a few months have passed, that I think it was really healthy to be able to sit down and talk about my feelings as a dad. Talking about our experiences is not something we do very well.

Finally, I want to touch on shared parental leave and the paternity leave we offer fathers. I have a degree of frustration about shared parental leave. I do not like the idea that we say, “You’ve got a certain amount of time, and the dad takes time at the expense of the mum.” I would like dads to get a bit longer for paternity leave. My experience of those first two weeks was different, since both my periods of paternity leave were spent on a neonatal ward. In any case, those two weeks tend to be full of family, with the mother-in-law visiting and the house going like an absolute fair. I would like the statutory paternity leave allowance to be doubled to four weeks. I know the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats committed to doing that in their 2017 manifestos. I just have a degree of concern that we provide shared parental leave at the expense of the other parent. It is equally important that mothers, particularly those who are breastfeeding, get that time.

This has been an excellent opportunity for us to come together to look at an area of policy where I think there is a degree of consensus. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, because I think we can move this agenda forward. For that reason, I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford for initiating the debate.
and her going up to talk to a woman I had never seen before, who turned out to be her midwife. That shows how difficult it is to engage both parents. I know that the Government are pushing for greater consistency, with the same midwife throughout the journey, but the fact that we have 3,500 midwife vacancies makes that a challenge.

The hon. Lady raised the subject of loneliness, too. I thank her for her work to introduce the Government’s loneliness strategy in 2018, building on the Jo Cox Commission, which is led by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy). That is a hugely important part of Jo’s legacy, and I am sure that Members across the House recognise the excellent contribution that the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford has made to drawing attention to that issue. There are, of course, many triggers for loneliness, one of which is being a new parent.

The hon. Lady also raised the important role that children’s centres can play. Several Members raised concerns about whether they are well enough used. Cuts of 60% to local government funding in recent years have led to the closure of 1,000 children’s centres, which provide support to both mothers and fathers in those early years. There is no doubt that that has had an impact.

The hon. Lady is right that we have a long way to go to reach true equality, with shared parenting. Shared parental leave legislation, which has been about since 2015, enables employed couples to split 50 weeks’ time off work after the birth of their child. The Government originally estimated that 8% of parents would take up the option of shared leave. However, disappointingly, take-up at the moment is only about 1% or 2%. A recent freedom of information request showed that take-up is particularly low among new parents, with only eight out of every 1,000 eligible people taking up the option. Some 8,700 new parents took up shared leave in 2016-17, and that increased by only 500 the following year.

The Women and Equalities Committee highlighted a number of problems with shared parental leave, including the complexity of the system, low uptake and low pay, and fathers’ fears about taking leave because of its perceived negative effect on their careers. There is a cultural issue here, so will the Minister say what can be done to address that?

Shared parental leave does not extend to self-employed parents. At present, self-employed mothers are entitled to statutory maternity pay of £140 per week, but they must take all that in one go and they risk losing their payments if they undertake work outside their 10 allotted “keeping in touch” days. Self-employed fathers do not have access to that at all. I hope that hon. Members will support the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Extension) Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), which would enable self-employed parents to split parental leave and pay between them. Given that the ranks of the self-employed seem to increase every year, will the Minister say whether the Government have any plans to legislate in this area?

Better pay and the option of part-time take-up of shared parental leave would improve access to leave for fathers, particularly those from lower-income groups. There is strong evidence of the effectiveness of non-transferable paternal leave as a lever for encouraging shared care and reducing the gender pay gap. We know that fathers want to play a greater role in their children’s lives and families want to spend more time together with a new baby. That is why, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East said, we made a manifesto commitment to double paid paternity leave to four weeks. Fathers are parents too and they deserve to spend as much time as possible with their family.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) gave a personal and touching account of his own experiences and set out well how fathers are almost removed from the scene shortly after birth, which is an experience that most of us who have been through that will recognise. Unfortunately, I think that sets a tone for the rest of the early years, if not the whole life.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) drew an interesting and important link between income and antenatal group attendance. He is right that fathers are not included as much as they could be in many of the inspection frameworks. His central point—this is something that we see across a lot of the NHS—is that the best practice is only in pockets, and does not always disseminate out into the whole of the system.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke about the importance of families and said that there can sometimes be a cycle of negative experiences throughout the generations.

The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) gave us the good news about his impending fatherhood, and he raised an important issue about the proximity of maternity services. That does not just relate to the reorganisation of services, as in his case; it is a sad fact that last year, about half of all maternity units had to close their doors temporarily at some point, which meant that someone who was in the process of labour would have to find somewhere else pretty quickly, which can be distressing and inconvenient.

The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) gave us a thoughtful and personal account of his experiences of fatherhood; we will all recognise many of things he described. He is right that parenthood is expensive, and that can add to the strain that young families experience. He made an important point about the silo-working that we often see across public sector agencies—a situation that we all want improved.

Finally, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) gave some contrasting examples of approaches to flexibility in the workplace and spoke of some of the cultural issues that we have already discussed. There is a need for a more consistent approach across workplaces.

As a father myself, I would like to spend more time with my children—or I certainly did until they became truculent teenagers; things got a little less pleasant then. Seriously, every parent wants to play as much of a role as they can in creating a safe, loving and stable environment for their children, so that they grow up into happy and healthy adults. We know that long working hours and the inflexible working approaches of some organisations make shared parenting duties a challenge. If we are to support men in taking a greater role in the family unit, we need to support men and women having a real and meaningful choice about how they organise their lives; that means family-friendly employment, applied equally to both parents.
It is a well-known fact that the gender pay gap is still here in 2019. The impact of women's being more likely to be in part-time, low-paid or non-paid caring roles has implications for fathers in the workplace. We committed to tackling the gender pay gap and have pledged that in addition to reporting gender pay gap figures, companies will be required to demonstrate how they plan to close their gender pay gap, by producing action plans and taking steps to address the factors that contribute to the pay gap. That will include tackling unequal pay and discrimination and improving access to flexible working and take-up of shared parental leave, to ensure that all employees have a better work-life balance.

I note with interest the proposal from the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford for a dad test, which would be applied to the relevant commissioning and inspection frameworks for the perinatal period. We know that this country offers some of the best neonatal care in the world, along with some exemplary psychological and bereavement services. However, as we have already touched on, there is an unacceptable variability across the country. As many as 41% of neonatal units have no access to a trained mental health worker. As has been highlighted in the past, speaking to many in our debates about baby loss, there has been an unfortunate experience for some constituents, while others have had access to the very best services. I am sure that we want greater consistency across the board.

I welcome the commitment in the NHS long-term plan to enhanced support for perinatal mental health services, including assessment and signposting to professional supports for fathers and partners. The question—which is the same for a lot of the long-term plan—is, are the resources and staff there to deliver on those important aims?

In conclusion, we are on a journey—we are not there yet—towards a greater understanding and facilitation of the father's role. Every day of a child's early years is hugely important. The more we can do to encourage more and better-quality support during those earlier years, the better.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I have enjoyed listening to everyone's contributions this morning. It is often said that MPs do not live in the real world, but we have heard some frank accounts this morning that very much prove that we do; we do share those experiences. I am proud of my hon. Friends who have been raw in their accounts of fatherhood. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) has not been put off by any of the things he has heard today.

The tone for the honest and frank accounts was set by the opening comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who was characteristically honest in her expositions. I am grateful to her for obtaining this debate. It is time that we gave a big shout-out to dads.

The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), who is no longer in her place, mentioned the 400,000 single-parent families headed by dads. My partner was one of those 400,000; he raised his son alone for the first 10 years of his son's life. It is often challenging for single dads, as things are focused on the mums. When he first started taking George to primary school, he was viewed as a bit of a curiosity by the mums and the teachers. A lot of low-level discrimination takes place towards dads in those circumstances, which we ought to be more alive to. That is probably symptomatic of discrimination towards dads. We have heard frankly today that it is all about the mum and the baby, and that the dad is a spare part. My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) described driving home, having gone through the trauma of childbirth, and asking, “What happens now?”, then not being able to visit mum the next morning. Collectively, society needs to be a lot more understanding and welcoming of the father's role in those early days, weeks and months, not least because it gives children the best possible start in life if dad is fully engaged.

We know that now, more than ever. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) is my conscience on these issues. He constantly emphasises to me that good-quality relationships are critical for every member of the family. He is absolutely right. Where society can bolster that, obviously we should take those steps. He has highlighted some things for me to look at, and I assure him that I will.

Childbirth and parenthood is life-changing and my hon. Friends have shared their experiences to illuminate that. Having support from a father as well as a mother is extremely important. We know that there are very real barriers to that involvement, including the pressures of work, which a number of colleagues have alluded to, particularly where employers in particular fields of employment are less than understanding about the fact that family is dad's work as well as mum's. That is something that we need to tackle. We have mentioned that services are not always tailored to dad's needs as well as those of mums.

There is a general lack of information. A life-changing thing happens, and people are kind of expected just to suck it up and go along with it. It can be extremely challenging and scary, so we need to be more understanding of that. We also need to be cognisant of the fact that it is the time of most acute stress and strain on relationships. It is probably the riskiest time for relationship breakdown. We need to make sure that wraparound support is available to dads who need it.

I would like to say that I was satisfied with progress. It is true that progress is being made, but the debate, and the research that has been mentioned, show that we need to do more. Among the things that we are putting in place and expect to deliver, our first steps clearly need to be in maternity services. We believe that they should do more to maximise fathers' involvement, at a time that clearly offers the most important opportunity to engage them in the care of their partner and the upbringing of their children. I can tell my hon. Friends who did not have that experience that we have invested £37 million towards the involvement of fathers in labour and post-natal units, including en-suite rooms and double beds adjacent to maternity wards. Clearly, that would be a much better experience for new fathers, and we will make sure that that arrangement is rolled out more and more. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance states that women, their partners and their families should always be treated with kindness, respect and dignity. We need to make sure that that is done properly. Scrutiny will be through Care Quality Commission inspections, which will be designed to ensure that maternity services deliver what we expect.
Interestingly, according to CQC’s survey of women’s experience of maternity care, 96% of women said that their partner was able to be involved as much as they wanted during labour and birth. Clearly that is not consistent with the figures that we heard today, but the explanation is probably that the question was asked of mums rather than dads. It illustrates what has been said about feeling like a spare part. My hon. Friends have been honest about their emotions at the time in question, and we know that men are not always frank in exposing their emotions. What the survey tells me is that a mum does not always know that the dad feels completely useless and like a spare part. That tells us that we have an issue to tackle. Seventy-one per cent. of women said that their partner or companion was able to stay in hospital with them as much as they wanted, but that is not borne out by the feedback today. My message going out to the health services is that in addition to inspections and standards there needs to be much more sensitivity and leadership, to make sure that dads are properly considered during such an important period.

I constantly challenge the instinctive prejudice within the system to spend the considerable amount of resource that the Government make available to the NHS on clinicians and clinical support, when we know that wraparound services, as often provided by the voluntary sector, are complementary to the services given by health professionals. When we are talking about supporting families and giving children the best start in life, the voluntary sector can obviously play a part. We have heard good examples of that today.

To move the subject on from birth to early parenthood, children clearly do better when both their parents are involved in their life. Where relationships are less strong, there is a risk of poorer outcomes in the long run, as we have heard today. The quality of fathers’ involvement matters more than the quantity of time they spend with their children and partner. We need to champion those who support their partners, which is facilitated by a father’s bonding with their baby or young child. When a father is an active parent, the secure attachment that is built as a consequence makes a big difference to the child as they develop their own relationships and resilience; it leads to better outcomes in life. For fathers it can be a positive experience, often helping them to re-engage with education, employment or training, and altering their outlook on life. My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford shared the experience of her partner’s doing exactly that.

How can we best support fathers in doing what I have described and exploring how to have the most satisfactory parenting experience? I see health visitors as our army in doing that. We have clear expectations about their work with new families. They keep an eye on them, with a view to getting the best outcomes for children and making sure that the family environment is secure. I see health visitors in that way because they often build a less formal and deferential, and more trusting, relationship with the new family. Often they are the only person who interacts with the dad. We shall be expecting health visitors to do much more to support fathers in the early months and years of a child’s life. We expect them to work to ensure that fathers are part of the holistic assessment of family fitness.

Where possible, both parents should be included in health reviews. I have heard the messages from various Members who said that that was not their experience, and we shall give a clear set of messages to the system about addressing that. Such an approach can only boost the chances of intervening early and getting proper support for the mother, the child and the father when it is needed. In doing my job I have been moved by health visitors’ accounts. We know that post-birth is a challenging time for mums, when they are most at risk of poor mental health. The feelings of isolation and helplessness on dads’ part in those circumstances are extremely difficult, and health visitors are incredibly well placed to provide support then, and steer them towards additional help.

Fiona Bruce: Will that encouragement of fathers include the time before the birth? As I understand matters—this is from CSJ—only about a third of fathers with a household income below £20,000 attend antenatal classes, compared with two thirds of those who are better off. One inhibiting factor is that if people cannot get a free antenatal class, a three-day course costs about £350. That is a lot of money for those who are already financially stretched.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The package of support that we are putting together, in terms of the continuity of carer, starts before birth and is designed to involve both parents. We are aware that there will be constraints on individuals’ ability to participate, and we need to make sure that the system is cognisant and respectful of that, and that it can make the relevant changes. My hon. Friend’s point is well made.

We need to promote initiatives such as Offload—a Warrington project for men aged 18 and over, in collaboration with rugby league. It helps men to learn the mental fitness techniques of professional sports players, to understand their own needs and help them cope. Such initiatives will enable new dads—because there is an issue with men facing up to mental health challenges—to reach out and get support from their peers.

The hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), who is no longer in his place, raised the issue of loneliness, and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford has done a great deal of work on that. Every father and family will have their own individual story. There is nothing like a life-changing experience to make one feel lonely, because all the familiar support networks are thrown in the air. We will expand social prescribing across healthcare services, so that all GPs can refer lonely patients to voluntary and community organisations. We reiterate that there is a role for the commissioning of the voluntary sector to do important work leading to better health outcomes. We will support spaces for community use, working with local groups to pilot ways to use space, to test how that can improve social connections. We need to make sure that we are keeping our eyes open for signs of loneliness, so that trusted support is given early.

In the short time I have left, I want to go further into the topic of mental health. Colleagues mentioned that 10% of fathers suffer mental ill health at the time of a child’s birth. We need to do more to support them. The “DadPack” used in Cornwall to help young fathers is a
great development, and I want to champion all such models. I thank colleagues for the examples they have given.

We have had an excellent debate. It is only the start of our trying to do better at supporting dads and young families. I look forward to engaging with hon. Members on this important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered supporting fathers in early parenthood.

School Funding: Gloucestershire

11 am

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That this House has considered school funding in Gloucestershire.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I welcome the Minister to his place, and I welcome my Gloucestershire colleagues; I am sure they will have things to say, but I know they will be very brief, because I want to make some points.

I will start with the caveat that this debate is about schools funding. There was an excellent debate on a petition on college funding a couple of weeks ago, so I have restricted my remarks to schools funding, but many of them also apply to the college situation in our county. I will begin with four quick quotes:

“...we are no longer at the ‘reduce your photocopying stage, provide your own pens and pencils’ stage in Gloucestershire. We are at the ‘don’t expect a TA but do expect a class size of 35 and certainly don’t expect a payrise’ stage.”

Secondly:

“Inclusive schools like ours have to use 85% of the money intended to support vulnerable children with additional needs, to top up the Per Pupil Funding just to reach the same level as local selective schools. This is resulting in a two-tier education system where inclusive schools receive less money.”

Thirdly:

“One of the more tragic results of the cuts for our more vulnerable pupils will be the financial disincentive to give these children places. In an increasingly ‘competitive’ climate there will, sadly, be schools actively finding ways to turn these children away so they become someone else’s problem.”

Finally:

“Like many schools, we have had to set a deficit budget to protect the education of the children in our school. We are finding more children with significant complex educational needs are being placed with us who must be supported from existing budgets with a knock-on effect for the rest of the children within school.”

Those quotes were from a teacher in Gloucestershire, a headteacher of a comprehensive in Gloucestershire, a headteacher of a village primary school and, lastly, a governor.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, my neighbour, for giving way, and I have a lot of sympathy with the people he is quoting. Does he agree that we are spending a record amount on education, but the distribution system is totally unfair, and the difference between the highest-spending local authority and one of the lower-spending local authorities, such as Gloucestershire, is completely unfair?

Dr Drew: It is unfair. I will outline my own views on that; as someone who supported the f40 group for a long time, as did the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members, I think we have a distribution problem as well as a problem of how much money is in the pot.

The national background is a lack of funding. The Minister might have something to say about the 3.5% pay award, which is having a dramatic impact in all our schools. Staffing costs are rising, and we have faced particular downward pressure on pupils aged 16 to 18, with a 20% cut since 2010-11. I emphasise the cuts to special educational needs and disabilities provision, which mean that it has in no way kept pace with rising demand.
Gloucestershire’s predicted overspend on SEND is now more than ever before, and that undermines part of the increased demand on their resources.

**Dr Drew:** That is a very fair point and I concur, but of course those other pupils who might have gone to Belmont and so on are now in mainstream schools, which is causing additional pressures on schools across the board. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated that there was something like an 8% cut in real terms between 2009-10 and 2017-18. Although the Chancellor’s little extra might go some way, in reality it is only £50,000 per secondary school.

Let us come on to what we are really interested in: Gloucestershire and the national funding formula. In Gloucestershire, the national funding formula is still not producing a fairer redistribution of funds, as my neighbour the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) pointed out. Gloucestershire’s secondary schools remain near the bottom in league tables of school funding, ranked 130th out of 149 on schools block funding. According to the House of Commons Library, Gloucestershire’s secondary schools received £4,886 per pupil compared with the English average of £5,229, and primary schools received £3,949 compared with the average in England of £4,059.

**Alex Chalk:** Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that some hon. Members in this House whose schools get far more than £5,200—some of them, I am afraid to say, Labour Members—were very indignant at the idea that schools in places such as Gloucestershire should get a bit more?

**Dr Drew:** There is a need to raise this issue for all our colleagues, which is what I am trying to do. I agree; it is not a party political issue, but crosses the spectrum, and we must all work together to do something. I am sure the Minister will have something to say about that in a minute.

**Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Is not one of the problems the fact that Gloucestershire is viewed as being a very rich county, but, although there certainly are areas of affluence, there are many that have special needs and deprivation? We need only look at the very different reading levels between schools even within one constituency. It seems to me that the current formulas do not take that properly into account.

**Dr Drew:** I agree; we know our county has areas of deprivation, which I will touch on. The new national funding formula suggests that about half of Gloucestershire’s 40 secondary schools will receive the minimum per pupil spend of £4,600 in 2019-20 and then £4,800 in 2020-21. We are not really catching up. That does not take into account the broad spectrum of need across our county.

I will move on to the acute problem of SEND. Gloucestershire has a special needs crisis; I do not use that word in anything other than its genuine definition. Gloucestershire’s predicted overspend on SEND is now set to be £4.7 million, up from £3.3 million last year.

The number of children with education, health and care plans in Gloucestershire has almost doubled since 2015. The Government’s announcement in December of extra funding for SEND resulted in £1.35 million for Gloucestershire and led the council to withdraw its request to transfer funds from the schools block into high needs, which had led to some controversy, as my Conservative colleagues will know.

However, that was only a sticking-plaster; it is not a long-term strategy for addressing high needs overspend. As Gloucestershire County Council’s lead education officer, Stewart King, told the schools forum in January, the overspend puts Gloucestershire in “a very serious and challenging position”.

GCC has also now reduced the financial support it provides for individual children with SEND. Schools are forced to pick up the financial burden of SEND support and are using general funds to meet additional needs, or are unable to meet the need of individual children. Even the Conservative-run county council has identified the problem. Councillor Richard Boyles, in letters that I have now received, identifies how much of a problem this is, and the council continues to ask us as MPs to lobby for a fairer funding formula. The impact of this funding crisis is clear: increased class sizes; a reduction in the number of teaching assistants; less support for SEND students; and a reduced curriculum.

Many schools will also not be able to implement the full 3.5% pay rise, or if they are able to, they will have to make redundancies.

The pressure on places and rising class sizes, particularly in special schools, is where the acute need is most felt, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said. We have to be sympathetic to that. However, there is also an issue with inclusivity, with schools that have taken the most vulnerable children facing the most difficult consequences, because we do not fund those children. High numbers of SEND children are hidden in the system.

The reality, as we now know, is that the majority of our primary schools are likely to face an in-year deficit. Quite simply, Minister, the schools do not have enough money. We can argue about the distribution issue, but at the moment the acute problem is that we need more money, particularly for SEND education.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes several good points. We would all like to see more money for schools in Gloucestershire, and he is right that secondary schools have faced considerable pressures. He is also correct to mention the £1.35 million SEND funding that the Government have given for both this year and next year. Those two years are guaranteed, and the Minister will no doubt want to say more on that. However, I am a bit puzzled by my distinguished constituency neighbour’s occasionally rather strong language. He referred in a tweet to deep, unjustified and ongoing cuts. That is not actually true, is it? The amount of money per primary and secondary school pupil in Gloucestershire has gone up and will go up further. Would he like to comment on the language we use as we lobby for more money?

**Dr Drew:** I will comment on that. I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. Although Brexit has completely overwhelmed Parliament, I have been inundated with
comments from headteachers, teachers, teaching unions, parents and even some pupils. Their message is that they face cuts. We can argue about how much those cuts are and how they came about, but the reality is that they face cuts. That is what they say. I have another page of quotes that I could read out that say what the situation is like.

I hope the Minister does not feel that we disagree in any way generally. We are saying that, specifically because of the SEND situation, we now face a very difficult problem in Gloucestershire, which is having an impact across all schools. We need to do something about it, and I hope that the Government are sympathetic.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) about those people’s feelings. I suggest he talks to people from schools in his constituency, whom I presume feel very much the same as those in schools in my constituency: that is, that they have faced a lot of pressure, which is now beginning to feed into the system with dire consequences.

Richard Graham: The point is not what our constituents tell us. It is understandable that every parent, teacher and school should ask for more. The point is the language that we use. When the amount of money is actually going up, to talk about deep, unjustified and ongoing cuts is surely wrong. In a sense, the hon. Gentleman has confirmed that himself, because he removed that tweet within about four hours of posting it. Will he confirm, for the record, so that all our teachers and parents are clear, that there are not ongoing per-pupil funding cuts in Gloucestershire? That money is going up and will continue to do so, on which the Minister will no doubt tell us more.

Dr Drew: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. There are cuts. He should go into schools in his constituency and see what is happening. I have now received hundreds of responses from people at the sharp end who believe, maybe wrongly, that there are cuts. We can argue about the figures—the absolute figures may look better than the reality—but the situation is that the schools that I represent face some dire situations. That is why I am here today.

The hon. Gentleman can secure his own Adjournment debate and defend what is happening. However, I think I have more of the moral high ground, and I defend what I say because I believe that there are cuts. I do not think that it is in any way justifiable to conclude anything other than that we face a very difficult situation. I came here to pinpoint a particular problem—SEND funding—but within the wider environment of a difficult funding outlook for our county.

I intend to give the Minister plenty of time to respond, so I will not say much more. I will make three points in conclusion. First—the point I have really concentrated on—increasing SEND need has demanded a funding response that Gloucestershire has not been able to meet. That is why, despite what the hon. Gentleman says, our SEND funding will still be in deficit. That may be because more people are applying for EHCNs, but the reality is that they have to be able to meet the genuine demands of people who see their children suffer.

Secondly, this is not about scaremongering but about the reality of the impact of what has happened over a long period. The unfairness of the system dates back to the previous Labour Government, which is why I have always supported the national funding formula. The difficulty is that we are not there yet, and we will not get there for some considerable time. The reality is that the differential is getting worse in the short run, and we stand to be worse off. The hon. Member for The Cotswolds is nodding. I hope the Minister will do something about that.

Thirdly, I have just come from a drop-in session on children’s mental health. Children’s mental health is having a real impact on what we need to meet additional needs in our schools. These issues are having a real impact on our children at the moment, whether on their mental health or through our inability to deal with their special needs.

I hope the Minister is listening and that we can move forward on this. Even though we might disagree on certain aspects, five MPs from the county are here to say that the funding situation is not right and that it is affecting our pupils, staff, and parents and so on. I hope that the Minister will pay some urgent attention to us, so that we can begin to deal with this. I hope he will give me some good news.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I look forward to the 10 or 15 minutes ahead of us. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) on securing this important debate and on his introduction of it. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for their important contributions. All of them continue to make strong representations to the Government about school funding in their area.

The Government are determined to create an education system that offers opportunity to everyone, no matter their circumstances or where they live. Schools must have the resources they need to make that happen. That is why we are investing more money in our schools, helping them to make the most out of every pound they receive, and delivering on our promise to make funding fairer through the introduction of the national funding formula. In 2017-18, funding was for the first time distributed to local areas based on the individual needs and characteristics of every school in the country. That will also happen in 2018-19, for the second year running. This historic reform is the biggest improvement to how we allocate school funding for a decade and directs resources where they are needed most.

We all want to ensure that all children, regardless of where they live, receive a world-class education. We have made significant progress on that, thanks in part to our reforms. The attainment gap between rich and poor children is shrinking, the proportion of pupils in good or outstanding schools has increased from 66% in 2010 to 84%, and primary school children have achieved their highest ever score on international reading tests.

While more money is going into schools than ever before, we recognise the budgeting challenges that schools face and that we are asking them to do more. Because of that, and because children only get one chance to have a great education, the Government have prioritised school spending, even while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas.
In total, across the country, core funding for schools and high needs will rise from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion in 2019-20. Figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies show that real-terms per-pupil funding for five to 16-year-olds in 2020 will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000. We can compare ourselves favourably to other countries. The UK spends as much per pupil on primary and secondary state education as any major G7 economy in the world, apart from the United States of America.

As well as providing additional funding for schools, we have made funding fairer by introducing the national funding formula. Under the previous system, schools with similar pupil characteristics received significantly different levels of funding for no good reason, meaning that some schools were not getting the resources that they needed. That is why it is so important that we have delivered on our promise to reform the unfair school and high-needs funding systems and introduce a national funding formula. Government Members have been particularly active over the years, through the f40 group, in ensuring that we have a fairer funding system.

Schools are already benefiting from the gains delivered by the national funding formula. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded. The underfunded schools will attract up to 6% more per pupil by 2019-20, compared with 2017-18. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester is absolutely right to insist on care in how we use language. He will be aware that the School Cuts website has been criticised by the UK Statistics Authority for some of the things stated on that website.

Gloucestershire schools will receive gains of 3.1% per pupil by next year, compared with 2017-18. That will mean an extra £19 million in total when rising pupil numbers are also factored in. On high needs, we have recently announced that we will provide £250 million of extra funding across England over this financial year and the next. In Gloucestershire, that means that the ongoing flexibility will take time for spending to be aligned to the allocations calculated at national level. The ongoing flexibility will represent a big change to the funding system. We understand the importance of stability to schools and we want to ensure that there is a smooth transition. We want to ensure that there is a smooth transition. We have therefore confirmed that for the next two years, local authorities will continue to be responsible for setting school budgets at local level. I may have got my years wrong at the beginning of this contribution: 2018-19 is of course the first year of the funding formula and 2019-20 is the second year. We have also confirmed that, in 2020-21, we will allow local authorities to use their local funding formula to allocate the funds. But we will allocate the funds to local authorities on the basis of the national funding formula.

We acknowledge that the national funding formula represents a big change to the funding system. We understand the importance of stability to schools and we want to ensure that there is a smooth transition. We have therefore confirmed that for the next two years, local authorities will continue to be responsible for setting school budgets at local level. I may have got my years wrong at the beginning of this contribution: 2018-19 is of course the first year of the funding formula and 2019-20 is the second year. We have also confirmed that, in 2020-21, we will allow local authorities to use their local funding formula to allocate the funds. But we will allocate the funds to local authorities on the basis of the national funding formula.

We are pleased to see significant progress across the system in moving towards the national funding formula in its first year. Many local authorities have chosen to move towards the national funding formula locally, with 73 local authorities moving all their factor values towards the NFF, and 41 matching the NFF factor values almost exactly. It is the case that 112 authorities, including Gloucestershire, have introduced a minimum per-pupil funding level factor in their local formula. I am very pleased that so many authorities across the country are showing such strong support for our national formula.

Alongside the local flexibility, we recognise that there needs to be a degree of discretion locally to change the balance between schools and high needs funding. Although we want schools to benefit from all the gains and protections afforded by the national funding formula, it will take time for spending to be aligned to the allocations calculated at national level. The ongoing flexibility will
help to ensure that the transition to the formula takes place in a way that best meets the needs of local schools and pupils.

We are committed to supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities to reach their full potential, and we expect all schools to play their part. That is why we have reformed the funding system to take particular account of children and young people with additional needs, and introduced a new formula allocation to make the funding for those with high needs fairer. As mentioned previously, we have recently announced that we will provide £250 million of additional funding for high needs throughout England over this financial year and the next. We recognise that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham has said, the high needs budget faces significant pressures, and that additional investment will help local authorities to manage them.

Of course, the response to pressures on high needs budgets cannot just be additional funding. That is why we have also set out plans to support local authorities in their role of providing strategic leadership and oversight of the provision for children and young people with SEND. We have announced other measures to support local authorities: a £100 million top-up to the special provision capital fund for local authorities in 2019-20 for new places and improved facilities; the removal of the cap on the number of special and alternative provision free school bids that we approve in the current wave; reviewing current SEND content in initial teacher training provision; and ensuring a sufficient supply of educational psychologists to carry out the statutory functions in relation to the EHCP process, and to support teachers and families. We will continue to engage with local authorities, health providers, families, schools and colleges to work together to manage the cost pressures on high needs budgets and ensure that children with special educational needs and disabilities get the support that they need and deserve.

We recognise that schools have faced cost pressures in recent years. That is why we have announced a strategy setting out the support that we will provide—current and planned—to help schools to make savings on the more than £10 billion of non-staff expenditure across England.

Richard Graham: Does the Minister agree that the key thing is not that funding has been cut but that costs have increased and therefore the issue is how we can share best practice among schools in order to make savings that will help to reduce any deficit that they might have?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is right. We do want to spread best practice. We have a cadre of school resource managers to help schools that are particularly struggling with their budgets to find savings. Other measures are national buying schemes for things such as printers and photocopiers and the roll-out of a free teacher vacancy listing website to help schools to find teachers and drive down recruitment costs, which are a big burden on schools at the moment. We have created a benchmarking website for schools that allows them to compare their costs with those of other schools.

I again thank hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I reiterate our commitment to providing every child with the opportunity to reach their potential. The extra investment that we are making in our schools, the fairer distribution of school funding, and support to use those resources to best effect, will help us to make that a reality.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
Zimbabwe

[MRS ANNE MAIN in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the situation in Zimbabwe.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. May I say how pleased I was to secure the debate at this particular time? I welcome the fact that the present Minister for Africa, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin); the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes); and a former Minister for Africa, the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) are here.

Most people will remember the euphoria—we saw it—in Zimbabwe just over a year ago, in 2017, when the long-serving President Mugabe was ousted in what can only be called a form of military coup. There was such hope then that after the years of oppression, unemployment and fear, real change was coming. At the time, some of us did point out that Mnangagwa had been very much part of the Mugabe regime and, indeed, had played quite a sinister role in the horrendous slaughter of thousands of people in Matabeleland back in the period from 1983 to 1987. Of course, he was joined by Chiwenga as vice-president. He had been the head of the combined defence forces and also played a very important role in the terrible situation in Matabeleland. But all of us who love Zimbabwe and know the potential of that beautiful country still hoped that change was going to happen.

The elections held last summer were another crucial milestone. It is worth remembering that elections in Zimbabwe since 2002 had been both violent and rigged. In 2008, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission took more than five weeks to declare the result, and more than 270 activists, almost all belonging to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, were killed. The polls in 2013 were relatively peaceful, but regarded internationally as rigged. The electoral voting rolls were grossly manipulated in favour of voters in rural areas, where ZANU-PF had the greatest support.

Shortly before last year’s elections, the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) and I visited Zimbabwe to get a feeling for what was happening there before the elections and to report back to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association on the possibilities of a free and fair election and how, if there were free and fair elections, we in this Parliament might do the same. We particularly note the fact that the new constitution that had been signed up to was not being adhered to. Access to the media was not being honoured. There were still problems with the electoral rolls. And we felt that the electoral commission was not showing a strong enough and openly transparent view that it was determined to have free elections. We warned in our report that although there would not be the violence around the election that there had been in the past, there was a real danger of its being another stolen election, and that the bar for a free and fair election was actually set very low.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady. Lady not just for securing this debate, but for her courage and tenacity in pursuing the issues that she has. Does she agree that because there is no violence in situations such as the one that she describes, there is very often an assumption in the international consciousness that elections have been free and fair when in fact, on many occasions, including the one that she is outlining, they are anything but?

Kate Hoey: Yes; the hon. Gentleman is right. The absence of violence specifically at the polling stations and so on was remarkable—there was not any—but that does not mean that the election was free and fair. Very often elections are rigged before election day, and then there is what happens afterwards. Of course, it was what happened after the election that night, literally, that made people feel that it was not free and fair.

Mnangagwa was declared the winner by the electoral commission, which was severely criticised for its way of dealing with the count and the delay, again, in making the announcement of the presidential result. We had in the country two Members of the House of Lords, Baroness Jay and Lord Hayward, who I am very pleased is here observing today’s debate. They went to the elections formally, to represent the Commonwealth—as part of the Commonwealth delegation—because of course Zimbabwe has applied to be a member of the Commonwealth again. It was very important that the Commonwealth was there. In fact, both Lord Hayward and Baroness Jay saw some of the trouble that happened immediately afterwards. Baroness Jay was in the hotel when the soldiers came in to stop an MDC press conference. Later, some totally innocent Zimbabweans were gunned down in the street by the army—some people were shot in the back. The international community, on the whole—I think that this applies to all the observers—made the point that the election was slightly freer and fairer, but there was not an overwhelming feeling that it was a wonderful Zimbabwean election and democracy was really back at its best.

Of course, since the election, the economy has got even worse. Mnangagwa made a great issue of the fact that Zimbabwe was open for business—the world could come and invest again; there was going to be this huge outflow of people, of food and other important goods. More recently, on 12 January this year, Mnangagwa announced a huge—200%—increase in the price of fuel. That was in a country in which very few people could afford the fuel price as it was, and it led to Zimbabwe, of all countries in the world, having the highest fuel prices. It was just not tenable, and people reacted. The trade unions, which have shown great courage throughout all of this, called for a countrywide “stay away” in protest, and there were demonstrations. There is no doubt that some of the younger people, unemployed people, were very angry, and probably some looting did go on in parts of Bulawayo and
Harare, but what the army and the Government did was to respond immediately with huge, excessive force, which left 12 people dead and up to 100 with gunshot wounds, and hundreds of people were lifted in the middle of the night, imprisoned and denied bail.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have seen pretty horrific images showing what has been happening to people on the ground: not just MDC activists, although that is bad enough—it is shocking that many of them have been lifted in the middle of the night, taken away and still are not getting legal representation or any support—but “ordinary” Zimbabweans who were seen to be in areas where there was support for the opposition.

What was also done—it was a very clever move, because all of us know just how much social media has changed the nature of reporting in Africa—was that the internet was closed down, shut down, and was out of action for some three days. That made a huge difference because, as is shown in all the letters that have come out and the reports that we have seen, people felt absolutely isolated in their homes. They were in the dark; there was no electricity. Roads were closed, transport had stopped, schools were closed—everything was closed—and there was no social media, no way to contact people. That was, I believe, a deliberate strategy to cut down the information getting out of the country, and of course that leads to more worry, more concern, and a feeling that everybody has abandoned them. We saw the numbers involved.

Sky News had a very good film, which again showed the army acting, in uniform and with absolute impunity, against innocent passers-by.

**Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): I have already asked the hon. Lady to forgive me for having to leave before the end of this important debate. She has consistently done wonderful work with her group. I thank the Minister of State, who, when I returned from Zimbabwe, calmed some of my enthusiasm regarding Mr Mnangagwa and the situation there, about which she and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) have proved to be dramatically right.

Does the hon. Lady agree with me that this pattern of behaviour during this period was clearly planned beforehand, and that it looks very much like the President left the country in order to come back and criticise it when he got home, and that this is part of a pattern that is totally unacceptable? Does she also agree that we must make the strongest possible representations to the Zimbabwean Government on behalf of the British Government?

**Kate Hoey**: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his years of support and work. I know how much he cares for Zimbabwe. He is absolutely right. There was this idea that Mnangagwa left the country as soon as the fuel price rose, to go to Russia and begin a tour of different countries—not countries that we would necessarily see as our best friends—to try to bring in some investment. I think that was absolutely deliberate, because he could then say that he had nothing to do with what was happening. Chiwenga, who is seen as the person who was lifted in the middle of the night, imprisoned and denied bail.

The systematic abuse and actual torture of individuals continues as we speak. The women who have been raped by soldiers have nowhere to report these crimes, because the rule of law in Zimbabwe has broken down. The Law Society of Zimbabwe has issued a statement raising its concerns about how all the legal cases of the people who were arrested have been conducted. It is a shocking indictment of what used to be a really good legal system. Zimbabwe was way ahead of most of the rest of Africa, in terms of rights and its attitude to the law.

People have said how they felt in the middle of this. People were too afraid to move around, because of the burning of vehicles. They knew that many of the soldiers were doing this, but not in uniform. The Zimbabwean Government had the audacity to think that people would believe their story that these people had gone to army barracks or police stations, stolen the uniforms and then taken part in this activity. Of course, that was complete nonsense. I could go on for a long time about all the terrible things that have happened, but there is no doubt that Mnangagwa knew what was going on. Whatever he has said about what he will do, nothing has happened—none of the responsible people have been prosecuted.

For me, one of the most dangerous things is how the constitution is being completely ignored and the level to which the rule of law has been trampled on by the Executive, the army, the police, the National Prosecuting Authority and some elements of the judiciary. One eminient politician, Innocent Gonese, who is the secretary for justice and legal affairs in the opposition party, said in a letter:

“I never thought I would ever live long enough to witness levels of such depravity, cruelty, callousness and downright disdain and contempt of the right of the citizens as enshrined in our Constitution and our statutes. While our country has had a history of serious violations of human rights starting from the years of colonial rule and repression and the epochs of gukurahundi, murambatsvina and the dark days of June 2008, the people thought that we had turned a corner in November 2017 with the demise of the former strongman Robert Mugabe.

Sadly it has turned out to be a false dawn. The actors may have changed with the removal of Robert Mugabe and some of his henchmen, but the script has remained the same if not worse.”

I find that pretty horrific, because we saw such dreadful things and now it seems that it is all happening again.

**What can we do? First, we cannot ignore what is happening.** I am pleased that the Minister called in the Zimbabwean ambassador. I am sure she will tell us more about that. We have to use our position where we can to influence and work with the South African Government and the Botswana Government. I know there is an Africa conference coming up in the next week or two; I do not know whether the Minister is going. We have to be clear that we are calling for the end of the deployment of the military. They have to go back into their barracks. We have to get the United Nations to say that and to make a strong statement on the rule of law.

We need a complete, absolute condemnation of the way that citizens’ internet access was closed down. We need to call for an independent investigation of the human rights violations to be led by the African Union or the United Nations. We have to find out who gave the orders. It was the same with the people who were killed just after the election—we never really got to the bottom of who had given the orders. The investigation ended up
being a whitewash. We need to investigate that, because the commission of inquiry in the post-2018 elections did not get to the bottom of it.

We have to be very clear—the United Kingdom Government have to be very clear—that the international community should completely suspend any initiatives related to re-engaging with the Zimbabwean Government. It is unacceptable, in my view, even to be talking about debt restructuring and private sector investment while so many Zimbabwean civilians are being assaulted and killed.

Ultimately, the sanctions we have now are very low. I am not suggesting that we go back to sanctions, because after the feeling that there was some hope for change, sanctions gave the Zimbabwean Government the opportunity to say, “The world doesn’t like us. It is only these sanctions that are causing all the difficulties.” Of course, there are no sanctions now, so they cannot say that. However, we may have to look at reviewing sanctions, particularly regarding travel. Mnangagwa got—I am not into aircraft—one of the top planes that can be hired, to go off on his trip. It cost thousands and thousands of dollars, while there are no medicines in the hospitals. Mnangagwa did not actually go to Davos. He left, because I think he knew that if he had gone to Davos, he would have received huge criticism, even there.

We are seeing crimes against humanity. Senator David Coltart, who many hon. Members will know, has made it very clear that crimes against humanity are still being committed. We have to engage very strongly with South Africa and Botswana, as I said. We have to ask the committed. We have to engage very strongly with South Africa, very unfortunately, this is a part of the South Africans’ failure to take seriously what is happening in Zimbabwe, and their failure on earlier occasions to criticise? They claim it is a reluctance to do so. It is a long-standing reluctance, which has been in place for many years. If they wish to be considered as a leading player in Africa on the diplomatic front, they need to exercise their will and their considerable power.

Kate Hoey: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The South African Government need to realise—I cannot believe they do not—just how important they could be in this. They could be a real beacon, acting in the interests of the people of Zimbabwe, rather than standing back and saying virtually nothing.

I want to pay tribute to the opposition in Zimbabwe. I have known Nelson Chamisa for a long time. When I first went undercover, he was one of the people who helped to show us around in very difficult circumstances. He is incredibly brave and very charismatic. He did an enormously powerful job in getting people involved in huge rallies, including young people and people who had never been politically involved before. Despite some people, perhaps even in his own party, he has continued to talk clearly about a peaceful future and a peaceful role. Despite his being accused of all sorts of things by the Government, we should give him huge credit for his role.

I have a couple of questions to ask the Minister. Although it is clear that Zimbabwe’s application for readmission to the Commonwealth has been seriously set back, there are aspects of the Commonwealth process and engagement, particularly with the people of Zimbabwe, that deserve support. We need to remind people that it is not the United Kingdom that decides whether Zimbabwe will go back into the Commonwealth, but the Commonwealth. Perhaps we have a bit more influence, but we certainly do not make that decision on our own.

Are Her Majesty’s Government ensuring that the excellent work of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum on strengthening democracy at a local level is well funded and supported by the UK and other Commonwealth countries? Local democracy is an important building block at the grassroots level.

Is the Minister still engaged in helping to support charities such as ZANE—Zimbabwe a National Emergency, which has done so much to help older people who have been left destitute? The pension issue has still not been sorted. One or two hon. Members have made that a big issue. I await the Minister’s view on that.

There has been a worrying trend recently, which may stop again now, of some of the Zimbabwean diaspora being sent back as part of the euphoria about the supposedly new regime. The Zimbabwe Vigil, which carries out a vigil on Saturday afternoons outside the Zimbabwean embassy and has maintained its solidarity and support for people in Zimbabwe, is worried that the Home Office is perhaps being too quick off the mark to send people back there where they could be taken into custody.

Will the Minister confirm that the Her Majesty’s Government, and particularly the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, have learned a lesson from what I would call the ill-advised cosying-up to the Zimbabwean leadership, which owed its position, power and loyalty to the military and political machine that manoeuvred to install it and not to the people of Zimbabwe through a free and fair electoral process? I will not go into more detail; the Minister knows what I am talking about. There is no doubt that our embassy in Zimbabwe had become too identified, rightly or wrongly—I think wrongly—with ZANU-PF. A new ambassador, Melanie Robinson, has just started in Zimbabwe and there are good reports about how she is settling in. On behalf of all hon. Members present and the all-party group, I await the Minister’s view on that.

I want to make sure that the Minister realises that those of us who urged caution, particularly Zimbabweans who have long had to cope with the machinations of ZANU-PF brutality and the manipulation of international opinion, were rebuffed by some officials in our embassy who thought that they knew better. I hope that we have learned that lesson. I pay tribute to all the people in Zimbabwe who have continued to work for democracy, and all the members of the all-party group and everyone in this House who will not let Zimbabwe be forgotten.

2.53 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I draw hon. Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I praise the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) for securing the debate and for the tireless work she does through
the all-party group, which is one of the most exceptional groups in the House, among many candidates. She spoke of how members of the Zimbabwean opposition had been fearless, but she has been pretty fearless over the years in going to Zimbabwe. As she noted, her most recent trip was funded by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which I chair. I encourage other hon. Members with specific interests in countries to come to us if they want funding for that type of trip.

In private, I have occasionally accused the hon. Member for Vauxhall of being a bit pessimistic. I was always more optimistic about Zimbabwe as Minister for Africa and, subsequently, through the Commonwealth. Sadly, again, she has been proven right and a realist about the situation—the reality held up. That is a lesson not just for our ambassadors but for many others who go into Zimbabwe but perhaps do not have the decades of experience that the hon. Member for Vauxhall has.

Although I do not have the same experience, I have a long-standing interest in Zimbabwe. When I worked for Barclays in Africa, when things were done well, all the pan-African IT for Barclays was run out of Harare—as, in fact, were all the IT systems for the whole Caribbean. That seems somewhat ridiculous, given the current situation.

Like many, I want Zimbabwe to return to being a prosperous nation state with proper elections, and I want it back as part of the Commonwealth family. Prior to the elections, however, I was premature in calling for it to be brought back into the family in a less conditional environment. I am still a bit more optimistic than the hon. Member for Vauxhall about keeping up engagement—what was called incremental engagement—which revolved around trying to move forward a little when there were some changes on the other side.

The news coming out of Zim is not only disturbing but wholly unacceptable. In the wake of peaceful civilian protests, the security forces launched brutal crackdowns across Harare and the country. Excess force and brutality, arrests and detentions are being used by the police and soldiers—and they are arbitrary arrests, because there is no law enforcement. That needs to stop.

In Rochford and Southend East, there are 889 people of Zimbabwean heritage, which is about 1% of my constituents. I have heard directly from them horrific tales and allegations about the systemic use of violence and torture by the armed and uniformed members of the Zimbabwe National Army and the Zimbabwe Republic Police, particularly in high-density areas outside Harare and in the suburbs.

One story recounted to me relates to a young man who lives in Budiriro, a high-density suburb in the south-west of Harare. He was rounded up with his neighbours and brutally set upon by police. His only crime appeared to be that he lived in the wrong street. Groups of young men had been setting up roadblocks on neighbouring streets and stopping and throwing stones at a few of the cars that remained despite the high petrol prices. The police were sent in and, instead of investigating the complaints, went round to all the homes near the roadblocks and dragged out and beat all the young men who were there, regardless of whether they were involved or not—collective punishment of the community for what had been done by a few. Some of these men were being held without charges or representation, and with no food or water. We cannot condone or accept that behaviour.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): That story is horrific, but the problem lies subsequent to that, as they have no legal remedy because the judiciary is not independent. A number of lawyers have been protesting in the streets in the last few months. What should we be doing to support those lawyers who are trying to get an independent judiciary?

James Duddridge: There is lots that we can do. The hon. Member for Vauxhall described the situation as terrible, but unfortunately, I have not got to some of the worst bits, which gives me no pleasure to say. There have been several reports about the use of sexual violence, in particular. On 23 January, ITV reported rape claims against soldiers during the unrest. It is my understanding that ITV has met 11 women, all of whom said they were sexually assaulted—that is to say, raped—and that their attackers were members of the Zimbabwean army. This appears to have been systemic and organised use of sexual violence, which should concern us even more than isolated cases of sexual violence.

The reports of death tolls have been varied and, I suspect, understated. Amnesty said that eight people were killed when police and military fired on crowds, while the Zimbabwean Government said only three people were killed, including a policeman who was stoned to death by an angry crowd. The Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights has said that doctors had treated 68 cases of gunshot wounds and more than 100 other cases of “assaults with sharp objects, baton sticks”, and they had seen people left with marks on their bodies after being kicked or stamped on with boots.

Notwithstanding the statement on Zimbabwe by my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa on 17 January and the representations that were made by the Secretary of State on 22 January, we need to ramp up our representations to our Zimbabwean counterparts. We need to remind them of their international obligations on human rights and freedom of opinion and expression, and about the results of the use of excessive force, as evidenced by the injuries that were documented in medical records; those are not just vague accusations.

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President Emmerson Mnangagwa cut short his foreign trip, which had been largely aimed at raising foreign exchange and returning investment. He returned to Zimbabwe to stabilise the situation. Well, I have not seen any stabilisation of the situation. I listened very carefully to my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) and the hon. Member for Vauxhall, who felt that the situation had been pre-prepared: petrol prices were put up; then, the President removed himself from the country; and there was a purge. I suspect that they are probably right.

Earlier, I had wondered whether there might be something else going on, namely that the military were taking greater control, as they did when there was the
earlier coup that led to Mugabe being ousted. I wondered who really is in control of the country; is it the President or is it his Vice-President, the former army general, Constantino Chiwenga? Chiwenga was the muscle behind the November 2017 push that forced Mugabe to resign and I just wonder what is going on behind the scenes. The President is clearly responsible, whether or not he directed or planned the violence; he is the President of the country.

I support the points made by a number of people about getting South Africa involved and I urge that we try to get South Africa involved at both a Government level and an African National Congress level; the ANC contacts with ZANU-PF are even more credible than the normal channels. More broadly, there is a role for the Southern African Development Community, although Botswana, Zimbabwe's neighbour, is particularly influential.

I am not a great fan of sending great missives from the UN, which feels very distant from African countries when they have problems. However, if the UN can do something in co-ordination with the African Union, led by Zimbabwe's near-neighbours, such as South Africa and Botswana, through SADC, that would probably complete the loop and it would give the authority and voice of the UN to Zimbabwe's local peers when they criticise the country.

I fear that the perpetrators and masterminds behind the systematic violence will be emboldened, not by our indifference or by what we say, but by what we do. We are very limited in what we can do, but we must try to do more. I also fear that there will be an increased open militarisation of the country, with further disregard for civil law and further unrest. In all conscience, we cannot allow that to happen.

Before the elections, I had hoped to welcome Zimbabwe back to the Commonwealth; I had hoped that more investment would come in; and I welcomed the CDC investment in Zimbabwe. I still think that that is the right route for the country to take ultimately. However, it seems less and less credible for us to support investment in Zimbabwe while the atrocities take place, although I am mindful that if British money does not come in, then Israeli, Russian or Chinese money, which would be less conditional money, will come in. I do not worry about that happening from the perspective of investment returns or British national interest; I worry about it because doing business in countries such as Zimbabwe allows us to leverage our influence within them. So, there is a fine balance to be struck.

I hope that I am proved right in my long-term optimism and I hope that the hon. Member for Vauxhall is wrong in her sometimes pessimistic attitude. However, I fear that yet again she is right. She is being a friend of Zimbabwe, but also a realist, and I thank her again for making an enormous contribution and for securing this debate.

3.5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mrs Main.

First of all, I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) on bringing this issue forward for consideration. I will place it on the record that she is undoubtedly a true democrat—the honour that she has shown this country by honouring the referendum vote is something that I sincerely wish was emulated by others in her party. She has done that very well, I congratulate her on it and we look forward to working with her on many other issues as we move forward.

Over the years, I have had a particular interest in Zimbabwe—or Rhodesia, as it was formerly—because I have a number of Zimbabweans who have come to live in my constituency who have lost their farms, their property and in some cases everything they had bar the clothes on their back. They fled the lovely country of Zimbabwe.

When I was a young man starting off on life's road, the Prime Minister of Rhodesia was Ian Smith; those of us who are of a certain vintage will recall him. I always remember his saying, because I have used those words myself many times, when he made a unilateral declaration of independence and separated himself from the United Kingdom and from the Commonwealth: “This is not the end. It's not even the beginning of the end. It is perhaps the end of the beginning.”

If only Zimbabwe was at the beginning of a process. We had hoped that, with the election of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, there would be a normalisation of the economy and a repairing of relations with multilateral institutions. We had hoped that his election would bring a new beginning, but unfortunately it has not. Indeed, the most recent clashes in Zimbabwe earlier this month were prompted in part by a sharp hike in fuel prices, which has made petrol and diesel in the country the most expensive in the world. So we can understand why people are up in arms.

Inflation in Zimbabwe is very high. Probably the only country that beats Zimbabwe for inflation is Venezuela, where inflation is running at 1 million per cent. and is predicted to be 10 million per cent. by the end of the year—unless, of course, there are new elections and Venezuela’s Opposition leader is elevated to the position of President.

What has happened in Zimbabwe has been the first glimmer of democracy in many years and yet it is clear that there is not democracy there just yet; there can be no true democracy without fear-free elections.

In my constituency, I have a number of churches that do missionary work in Swaziland and Zimbabwe. They are very active in education. They are the Elim Missions, whose headquarters is in Newtownards, in my constituency. There are very active Elim churches in my constituency, and indeed in nearby constituencies. I see that the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is here in the Public Gallery today; there is a very active Elim church in her constituency, and there is also one in Belfast East. Collectively, they do some fantastic work in education, health and helping young people. There is also the issue of medication and HIV/AIDS, which is very prevalent in Zimbabwe.

I am well known as someone who believes in foreign aid. I believe that we should provide help in a sustainable manner to those who cannot help themselves: rather than giving them a fish, we should give them a net; and rather than have a farming show, we should show people how to farm. The ways in which we can help go on and on.

For Zimbabwe to have gone from being the breadbasket of Africa—as it was once, in its heyday, and continued to be even when Mugabe first took over—to the poverty-stricken nation that it is now is simply heartbreaking.

[James Duddridge]
and I sincerely believe that Zimbabweans must be helped. In this debate, we are very conscious of how we can help the ordinary Zimbabwean people.

Successful farmers helped the economy by creating jobs and wealth, but their land and farms were seized. There has been murder, destruction, the stealing of land and, as referred to by the hon. Members for Vauxhall and for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), sexual violence and the rape of women, who have been violated. It is totally wrong that those involved in the Zimbabwe army are those who are responsible for the bestiality that we have seen in recent days.

However, it is also clear that Zimbabweans need more than simply our help in the form of foreign aid funding. The Library briefing makes something abundantly clear:

“...In 2018 the UK government gave support to international and local election monitoring initiatives, including £5 million specifically to support election-related work.”

There was an onus on, and perhaps a need for us in this country to ensure that the elections were free and not corrupt, so that any illegalities did not take place. Unfortunately, it was not shown that the election was entirely fair. There were many violations and concerns were expressed by Christian Aid. For many countries in the world, including Zimbabwe, because we hope it can reach the democratic process, and also because I have many brothers and sisters in that country who are also Christians, and I am very conscious of that.

UK-Zimbabwe trade and investment has been at low levels over the past decade and sensitive to political and economic uncertainty. In May 2018, the CDC Group, the UK Government’s development finance institution, announced an investment facility, in partnership with Standard Chartered Bank, that would lend some US $100 million to growing businesses in Zimbabwe—a really good idea. It was reportedly the first commercial loan by a British entity to Zimbabwe in over 20 years. Again, we as a country were trying to help Zimbabwe in the new democracy that was hopefully going to unfold, and we hoped that they would do better. In 2017, Zimbabwe was the UK’s 14th-largest export market in Africa, accounting for 2% of UK exports to Africa, and the 13th-largest source of imports from Africa, accounting for 1% of UK imports from Africa. So there were key economic links going out and coming in. Globally, Zimbabwe was the UK’s 91st-largest export market and the 108th-largest source of imports. We want to trade with Zimbabwe, but we also have to ensure that Zimbabwe has a democratic process and democratic institutions that work.

Let us look at what has happened recently. The hon. Members for Vauxhall and for Rochford and Southend East have already referred to this. The internet was deliberately stopped by the Government for three days; roads, schools and banks are closed; the very fabric of society has broken down; hundreds of people have been arrested simply because they were protesting about the hike in the price of fuel and food. If people and their families are starving and the new President has told them there will be a brand-new beginning, no wonder they ask, “Where is this new beginning?” People were unable to communicate for the most basic of reasons, all to ensure that no message could be spread other than the ZANU-PF propaganda.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall mentioned some of the reports on TV, which I have seen as well. The TVs did not lie. Behind the army trucks in Zimbabwe were soldiers kicking, beating and taking violent action against innocents on the street. So I ask this question: whenever the evidential base is there, how come action is not taken?

Kate Hoey: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but he has mentioned the media and television; I want to praise Christina Lamb, The Sunday Times international reporter, for her work and the reports that she has brought back, which graphically describe some of the abuses that the hon. Gentleman talks about.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She reiterates the facts of the case that we all know of. There is evidence of violence, corruption, attacks on women, and the stealing of property. I do not say that everyone is innocent; some looting has taken place, but that does not take away from the overall corruption within the new Government. Such attacks are not the actions of a democratic Government. They are the actions displayed by Mugabe during his dictatorship, which we thought we had got rid of. Very little has changed, which is so sad, but it must change if we are to continue working so closely with the Government.

It is believed that Zimbabwe’s application to rejoin the Commonwealth, submitted in May 2018, having withdrawn from the organisation in 2003, is being considered, and the Government said in April 2018 that they would “strongly support Zimbabwe’s re-entry”.

To me, Zimbabwe has done little to engender that level of support and we need to be very careful about what we do. Membership of the Commonwealth has many facets: respect for the Queen, respect for others, and dedication to running a country in a democratic way. So are we really supporting Zimbabwe by bringing it back into the Commonwealth, which I would love to see, but with conditions that have to be met? We cannot expect it to come in willy-nilly and continue what it is doing. Should we really support that at this time? Should we be willing to observe, monitor and regulate what is happening? I understand that membership of the Commonwealth allows us perhaps to have a greater influence that we can use for the good of some countries, but if the millions that we pour in are not influencing—this is the question I ask—I fail to see how our support of membership will influence.

In conclusion, I understand that changes are not made overnight, but there has been time and there has been no improvement for the people on the farms—the breadbaskets of Zimbabwe. There has been time, but no improvement for schoolchildren and teachers who have small wages and not even books in schools; no improvement for patients and doctors, so money needs to be spent there; and no sign of change. We must make it clear that giving time is not the answer. Action is the only answer, and we must see it now.

3.17 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to begin the summing up in this debate. Mrs Main. I commend the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) for securing the debate and thank her for a very informative summary of where Zimbabwe has been in the recent past. She put into context what has been happening there in the past few weeks. The hon.
Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have contributed their own knowledge, highlighting the underlying problems that have to be addressed before Zimbabwe can be returned to its people. Truly fundamental in the governance of any country is that the people should be allowed to govern themselves. The country should be governed in the interests of the people and not only in the interests of those who govern.

In any debate about alleged human rights abuses in another country there are two principles that we have to observe. First, we have to recognise the rights of nations to govern themselves. We have no right to interfere in the internal affairs of another country in normal circumstances. What is happening in Zimbabwe now cannot be allowed to become normal circumstances, because the sovereignty of individual nations has to be tempered by the fact that there are standards of behaviour and fundamental human rights that transcend all national borders. Where there is evidence that the power of the state is being abused to deny fundamental human rights, the international community, countries individually and collectively, have not only a right but a duty to intervene to set things right, initially through political and diplomatic efforts, but if necessary by the use of economic influence as well. I certainly take on board the caution advised by the hon. Member for Vauxhall about using economic sanctions, because too often the sanctions punish the victims without having any impact on the perpetrators.

There are obvious difficulties in knowing what exactly has been happening in Zimbabwe, but some things are clear and unambiguous, giving grounds for serious concern among the international community. I think they add up to overwhelming evidence that the international community has got to intervene.

There were large-scale protests after massive price increases left millions of Zimbabweans unable to afford the basic essentials of life. There were people with jobs who could not get to work because the bus fare was more than they would be paid. The police and army intervened in the protests and there has been significant loss of life, and significant numbers of people have been injured. Reliable reports are that at least 12 people have been killed, and 78 others were treated for gunshot wounds. A significant number were treated for other injuries. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, a body appointed by the Zimbabwean Government, has identified at least 240 cases of assault and torture. We should commend the commission for having the courage to speak out. Many institutions in Zimbabwe, even if they are not put under the cosh by the Government, sometimes think that they are there to do the Government’s bidding. It is all the more remarkable that the human rights commission is publishing such specific, utterly damning indictments of the country’s Government.

More than 700 people have been arrested. Often, as the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East said, there are wholesale arrests, when anyone who happens to be in a house close to an alleged incident is arrested, usually with extreme violence. People are often viciously beaten before being dragged away. Boys as young as 11 have been seen being beaten by gangs of uniformed police officers in the street. There has also been clear targeting of anyone seen as a political opponent of the Government. In one case, a councillor—not even an MP or shadow Minister—was dragged from his house, beaten almost to death and arrested, in front of his three-year-old daughter. Remarkably, that wee girl was able, despite the trauma she experienced, to give a detailed account of what happened. Hopefully one day soon her evidence will help to make sure that those responsible are brought to justice.

There have been numerous allegations—and numbers are increasing—of women being gang-raped by uniformed soldiers. It is all very well for Ministers in the Zimbabwean Government to say, “If this has happened to you, come forward and make a complaint, and we will deal with it.” It is difficult in western European democracies for women to have the confidence to come forward and report that they have been raped or sexually abused. It must be difficult to the point of impossibility for a woman in Zimbabwe to report such a vicious assault to the authorities whose very people are responsible in the first place.

The changing response from the authorities is notable and revealing. Initially, as always happens in such cases, they tried to deny anything had happened. They denied that there had been violence and said that such violence as there was had somehow been the responsibility of the protesters. Then they admitted that the police and army had used force, but claimed that it had been proportionate. A Government spokesman told the BBC, “When things get out of hand, a bit of firmness is needed”.

It was only when there was incontrovertible video evidence that could not be claimed to be fake, making it clear that police and army officers were involved in assaults, that the authorities finally accepted it had been happening. Chillingly, the President’s own spokesperson said the crackdown was “just a foretaste of things to come”.

We have to wonder whether the few police and army officers who have been arrested are being used as examples. Their cases seem to be the ones where the evidence is so overwhelming that no one can deny what happened. We must wonder whether a cynical attempt is being made by Mnangagwa and his colleagues to look as if they are on the side of justice, when all the evidence points to their being at least complacent about, and possibly actively complicit in, the brutality.

It is clear that the vast majority of Zimbabwean citizens have no confidence in the Government’s ability or even willingness to enforce the rule of law on its own law enforcers. The Government may blame rogue elements in the security forces, but they have a responsibility to control the behaviour of everyone they put into uniform in those forces, and the international community must take steps to ensure that they carry out that responsibility. If President Mnangagwa wants to be accepted as President he has to start accepting his responsibilities as President. Being the President, Prime Minister or monarch of any country is not a way for someone to enrich themselves and their pals at everyone else’s expense.

I want briefly to share the experiences of two of my constituents who were forced to flee from Zimbabwe during the regime of Robert Mugabe. Although in some ways their experiences may not seem directly relevant to what has happened recently, they illustrate...
many of the fundamental problems continuing to affect the country, which make it more difficult now for justice to be done, and be seen to be done. Paul and Brenda-Lee Westwood ran a successful business in Zimbabwe in partnership with a local businessman. Their share of the business was seized by someone who at that time was an MP in Mugabe’s ZANU-PF party. The seizure was illegal even under the so-called indigenisation policies of the Government of the day. Those responsible were put on trial for a fraud valued at more than $1 million but the case collapsed in circumstances that remain unclear. After Mr Westwood lodged an appeal the prosecutor died in mysterious circumstances and several of the accused and key witnesses disappeared and, as far as I know, have never been seen again.

The Westwoods then experienced months of intense intimidation with increasingly violent and explicit threats against them and their children. Eventually in 2012 after enduring that for several years, they abandoned the life they had built together and fled the country. Since then they have been trying to have their case heard in the Zimbabwean courts but, like the victims of the recent brutality, they can see nothing to make them believe that the new Government will make their chance of a fair hearing any greater. I know that the Minister and some of her colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have been working on my constituents’ behalf, and I thank them.

The new Government in Zimbabwe is keen to rejoin the Commonwealth. I can understand why at one point a number of people and the UK Government would have been keen on that happening. I would support the UK Government in helping Zimbabwe to become fit to rejoin the Commonwealth, but it would be a disastrous mistake to encourage or support an application when, clearly, it is not fit for membership of that honourable organisation. We need to make it clear that it cannot rejoin the Commonwealth until it can demonstrate beyond doubt that it has fully re-established the rule of law and the principle of respect for the human rights of all its people, regardless of creed, colour, race, gender or political views. I have a duty to represent my constituents, and I argue that people such as the Westwoods, and others who have suffered similar ordeals at the hands of the Zimbabwean Government, must receive a fair hearing. If an impartial court so rules, they should be given proper compensation for their loss.

There must at best be severe doubt about whether the investigation of recent atrocities and the holding to account of those who committed the crimes, gave the orders, or stood by and watched can be left to the Zimbabwean Government. I do not think it can. The rule of law has become so unreliable that those incidents can be properly investigated only with outside help. That is what must happen, because what has happened in Zimbabwe is too serious to be ignored as an isolated, localised problem.

For generations—perhaps centuries—the people of Zimbabwe seem to have been misruled and mismanaged by almost everyone. That has lasted from the absurdity of their country, and often their lives, being seen as the possessions of a Government thousands of miles away, to the appalling racialism of the Smith regime and, more recently, the combination of disastrous economic incompetence and rampant corruption under Mugabe. That has meant that in a country whose natural resources are sufficient to give all its people a very decent standard of living the majority of the population are reduced to absolute poverty. I want the Government, in co-operation with other Governments and through bodies such as the Commonwealth and the United Nations, to help the people of Zimbabwe to see how to take their country back from the despots and dictators who have held sway over them for far too long.

What is sometimes called soft power, or soft influence, is often important. Exchange visits would enable elected politicians and others involved in civic society in Zimbabwe to come to the United Kingdom or other countries to see how things are and how they operate, in what looks like a reasonable democratic society. They could then see that it is possible for differences to be resolved without guns, tear gas and violence. We have to ask ourselves, just now, whether the way politics is being done in the United Kingdom is all that good an example for Zimbabwe or anyone else. Do some of the scenes that we have witnessed in the House of Commons Chamber in the past couple of days look like—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying far off the topic of the debate. Can he please confine his remarks to the topic of Zimbabwe? I do not wish to hear too much about yesterday’s debate.

Peter Grant: I will, Mrs Main. I suggest that the United Kingdom, and any other country that wants to set an example to the people of Zimbabwe about how democracies can operate, sometimes need to make sure that they are as good examples as they think they are.

The people of Zimbabwe have been through more than the people of any nation on Earth should be expected to tolerate. I want to see the day when Zimbabwe is returned to its people, and the citizens of Zimbabwe are able to enjoy the rights that all citizens should have: the right to self-expression; the right to assemble; the right to disagree with and protest against their Government; and the right to remove their Government and replace it with a Government of their choice, if that is their wish. I look forward to the Minister telling us what the Government of these islands can do to help the people of Zimbabwe achieve that goal.

3.30 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairwomanship, Mrs Main. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) for securing this important debate; Zimbabwe is a subject upon which she is very knowledgeable, and I thank her for her comprehensive introduction to the debate.

It is vital that we take this opportunity to discuss the violence that erupted in Zimbabwe earlier this month. A short debate on this issue also took place in the House of Lords on 21 January, which covered many of the points that have been raised today. As evidenced by the tone and content of this debate and the debate in the other place, there is clear concern about problems in Zimbabwe, ranging from currency problems to violent protests. I know that Zimbabwean people feel that way as well.
Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): This is an excellent debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) on securing it. My father grew up in what was then Rhodesia and is now Zimbabwe, and I remember the turbulent times during the civil war; I also remember the optimism when that country became Zimbabwe, and the recent optimism when Mugabe was ousted. However, does my hon. Friend mention the external enemy, and does she agree that DFID must put safeguards in place to make sure that does not happen? I think every Member who spoke in the debate has raised that issue, and I will be referring to it later. I am sure that the Minister will be able to speak with some authority on that topic.

The Zimbabwean people are tired of the systemic issues that have plagued their nation for so many decades. It has been said that people in Harare complain that the new Administration is akin to a new driver in an old taxi. It was recently my privilege to visit South Africa, where I met many members of the Zimbabwean diaspora who expressed to us the same views regarding the lack of any change. The figurehead may have changed, but they were pessimistic that the country itself would change. As many Members said, the current violence erupted following the Government’s hiking of the price of fuel, making it the most expensive anywhere in the world. The Government’s response has been to blame the fuel shortages that caused that violence on those who hoard fuel and trade it on the black market, and while there may be some truth in that argument, those fuel shortages have been compounded by the Government’s mismanagement of the currency crisis.

The Government must also take responsibility for their subsequent actions. The violence that followed a general strike on 14 January was utterly deplorable: in the cities of Harare and Bulawayo, protesters faced a vicious clampdown, in which soldiers as well as police were deployed to shut down peaceful protests. The figures are not totally reliable, but there seem to have been around 12 confirmed deaths; at least 78 gunshot injuries; between 700 and 1,500 detentions; and 844 human rights violations. The Government’s shutdown of internet services during the violent outbreak, severely disrupting the flow of information and hiding and obscuring the behaviour of the army and the police, is also troubling.

Here we are again, with Zimbabweans suffering as a result of Government violence. Last year’s elections represented a real opportunity for the country to change following the end of Robert Mugabe’s regime. However, despite the improvements in the election process that were noted by various election observers, those elections were not free and not fair, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall outlined in her opening speech. The subsequent violence was nothing new in Zimbabwe, but it was particularly disappointing that the opportunity for change was not taken. That opportunity for change is still there, but the new leader is falling back into old habits. If President Mnangagwa is to avoid gaining the same reputation as his predecessor, he must act swiftly to restore the hope that existed last summer and put an end to attacks on civilians. We do not want history to repeat itself, nor do the Zimbabwean people. The future could be so positive for Zimbabwe, but its people will need help in getting there.
relationship with our country and countries around the world, but we cannot just gift Commonwealth membership to Zimbabwe. A return to the Commonwealth must be conditional on Zimbabwe's resolving its infringements of the Harare declaration of 1991. It would help if the Minister could explain whether her Government will prioritise human rights and do what they can to ensure that Zimbabwe is not allowed to rejoin the Commonwealth until its Government implement significant reforms and stop the violent crackdowns by security forces on the public that we have seen in the past two weeks.

I am pleased to hear that the Minister met the Zimbabwean ambassador recently, and I am sure she will elaborate on the outcome of that meeting. Will she say what she has been doing with our partners in Europe and with the African Union to ensure that the programme of reform for Zimbabwe outlined 12 months ago at the EU-AU summit is maintained? Finally, I know she met the EU and the African Union last week. What action is planned for Zimbabwe? In addition, what specific action will the UK Government take?

3.41 pm

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) on securing this important and timely debate. We have had excellent and well-informed contributions not only from the hon. Lady, but from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). We also had interesting interventions from other colleagues who get credible information from a range of different sources. I pay tribute to the long-standing interest of the hon. Member for Vauxhall in Zimbabwe, including as chair of the all-party parliamentary group. I add my voice to those of colleagues who have spoken so highly of her ongoing engagement.

I can only add the Government's view to the many examples that have been cited about the situation on the ground. The recent developments in Zimbabwe are cause for significant concern for Her Majesty's Government. The response of Zimbabwe's security forces to protests against the petrol price rise has been disproportionate. The Government's internet shutdown must act now and learn lessons from the events and the tragic violence that followed the election on 1 August 2018. The President must, as he promised, implement the recommendations of the commission of inquiry into the 1 August violence.

3.46 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4 pm

On resuming—

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE in the Chair]

Harriett Baldwin: As I was saying, President Mnangagwa must address the finding of the commission that the use of force by his security services was unjustified and disproportionate. The Government's internet shutdown was also a disturbing curtailment of freedom of expression and the media. I was pleased that the High Court of Zimbabwe ruled the shutdown unconstitutional on 22 January.

The UK Government have been robust in our response to the crackdown, including working with the EU. Targeted EU suspended sanctions remain in place, including on Vice-President Chiwenga. I summoned the Zimbabwean ambassador on 17 January and told the ambassador that we expected Zimbabwe's security forces to stop using disproportionate force, and that the Government should reinstate full internet access and investigate all allegations of human rights violations. The Foreign Secretary repeated that message publicly to President Mnangagwa on 21 January.

Last week, I met the African Union Commissioner for Peace and Security to raise concerns about Zimbabwe. Yesterday, I spoke to Foreign Minister Moyo to reiterate our concern and to call for an end to ongoing human rights abuses. I am also travelling to the region this week, to urge a co-ordinated international approach to the crisis.

Our ambassador in Harare, Melanie Robinson, has delivered the same messages locally. She met Home Affairs Minister Mathema on 23 January and Foreign
Minister Moyo on 25 January. The ambassador also met the opposition leader, Nelson Chamisa, on 16 January. She has also been meeting civil society groups supporting victims of the violence and working to bring perpetrators to account. The team that we have on the ground in Zimbabwe has been absolutely outstanding throughout. I pay tribute to our entire diplomatic service and to our DFID civil servants.

At the end of the day, Ministers are advised by civil servants, but it is we who decide. The programme of clear-eyed engagement with the new regime to encourage free and fair elections is one that I am happy to answer to in Parliament.

DFID supports the Commonwealth Local Government Forum. In fact, the UK provides extensive financial and technical assistance to a range of civil society organisations in Zimbabwe. They help to support Zimbabwean citizens to hold the state to account. I am sure that colleagues will understand that we do not publicise the names of our partners, to avoid putting them at risk. That in itself is an indictment of the Zimbabwean regime.

I assure colleagues that extensive work is being done on the humanitarian side, that no aid is channelled through the Government of Zimbabwe, and that the UK will continue to play a key role in ensuring that the very poorest in Zimbabwe will have their suffering minimised during this period when economic reforms need to be undertaken. It is vital that Zimbabwe’s political leaders focus on doing what is best for its people, with all parties rejecting violence and upholding the rule of law.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): There is a Division in the House. Does the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) wish to respond to the debate? She is indicating that she does not. In that case, we will conclude the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the situation in Zimbabwe.

4.4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

English Channel: Illegal Seaborne Immigration

4.20 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered illegal seaborne immigration across the English Channel.

May I say what a joy it is to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher? I am sure that we will all benefit from your benign chairmanship. I thank Mr Speaker for granting me this debate, and I welcome the Minister and other hon. Members present.

The debate is about the number of people who are crossing the English channel illegally—often in very small unsailable, risky craft—to get to the United Kingdom. That is extremely dangerous; it has been described by the police as like “trying to cross the M25 at rush-hour on foot.” It is also driven by illegal people trafficking. Far too many of those who are successful remain in the United Kingdom, whether or not their claim is justifiable.

As I understand it, in 2018, 543 asylum seekers crossed the English channel illegally, including 438 in the last few months, October to December, of 2018. I invite the Minister to confirm those figures in her response. A lot of people are making that very risky crossing and those figures account only for those who make it. I would like to know from Her Majesty’s Government if there is any estimate of the number of people who have died at sea trying to make the crossing.

The main route is across the short straits between Dover and Calais, which cover only 22 or 23 miles. Recent reports, however, say that some asylum seekers try to make an even longer crossing. In January, four Iranians were caught near Mablethorpe in Lincolnshire, having travelled across the North sea from Belgium—a journey 10 times longer than across the short straits between Dover and Calais. A lot of those people arrive along our coast, either on deserted stretches of the coastline or in small towns and villages. Their aim is to seek asylum. What concerns me and my constituents is that it is not only extremely risky activity that is dangerous to those seeking to cross the channel and to shipping, but it is effectively fuelled by horrendous people—the people traffickers—who charge those poor people a lot of money for the equipment to try to get across the channel.

There is also a security risk. The No. 1 priority of Her Majesty’s Government is to defend this nation. We do not know who those people are, where they come from or what their intentions are, and that activity needs to be stopped. The simplest way to stop it is this: if people are intercepted crossing the channel, they should be taken back to the ports from where they came, whether in France, Belgium or elsewhere.

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): When I was a television reporter I lived undercover in the Sangatte camp in Calais, and spent several weeks trying to get into the UK. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend: the only way that we can stop the economic migrants—I would do exactly the same in their position, but they are economic migrants, not refugees, because they pass
through many safe countries—is to break the idea that getting into Britain or Europe means they can stay there. Until we do that, the problem will go on and on.

**Mr Hollobone:** I could not have put it better myself; my hon. Friend is exactly right. Those people need to be taken back to France, whether they are intercepted trying to cross the channel or after they have arrived in the United Kingdom.

I would like to know what we are doing to stop that illegal people trafficking. My understanding is that two Border Force cutters are bobbing around somewhere in the English channel. I am told that two more are on the way, because we had lent them to the EU to patrol the Mediterranean. Can the Minister confirm that there are two Border Force cutters in the English channel and that two more will be added to that number, and when that will happen? I understand that Border Force has a total of five cutters and six coastal patrol vessels at its disposal. Where are all those vessels deployed and what are they doing?

The Royal Navy has a patrol vessel in the channel, but I am reliably informed by sources in the Government that the Royal Navy actually has very little to do with Border Force operations. Its deployment is therefore probably just a cosmetic exercise by Her Majesty’s Government in order to seem tough on the issue. I have the highest regard for the sailors of the Royal Navy and for those who serve on the Border Force cutters—they do their best in difficult circumstances—but I am not convinced that the Home Office or the Ministry of Defence is taking the issue seriously enough. In her response, can the Minister outline what vessels we have in the English channel and what they are doing exactly? Have they intercepted any asylum seekers and, if they have, have they taken them back to France or Belgium, or have they simply ensured safe passage to these shores?

The Government have spent £6 million on new security equipment for the French, including CCTV, night goggles and automatic number plate recognition equipment, for deployment in ports on the French coast. I welcome that if it is true, but I am not quite sure why we, rather than the French, have to pay for it. That compares with the £148 million that Her Majesty’s Government have spent since 2014 on extra security at the port of Calais. I would like to see aerial surveillance close to the French coast, so that if small boats are detected trying to cross the channel, information can be relayed quickly to the French authorities, who can intercept them. Will the Minister tell the House whether the French have any vessels patrolling those waters? The rumour is that they have one French navy patrol boat doing something off the French coast. Is that true? Have any French vessels intercepted any asylum seekers and, if so, do they take them back to France, or do they offer them safe passage across the channel?

I understand that we have a comprehensive naval agreement between the Royal Navy and the French equivalent, covering a variety of defence and security issues. Under that agreement, is there any way in which we can have shared patrols so that wherever people are intercepted in the channel, they are taken back to France? It seems to me that the picture painted from all the television coverage is that if people are intercepted at sea, they have effectively made it—if intercepted at sea, they will be brought to the British coast. That acts as a magnet for people to try the passage, because they know that they do not have to get across the 23 miles; they only have to make it to the 12-mile limit and, once they have crossed it, they will be picked up and brought over to this country.

There is something called the Dublin convention, or the Dublin regulation, whereby if someone claims asylum in the United Kingdom and has been in a safe country on their way here, we are entitled to return them to that country. Are we using that? My information is that since 2015 we have returned only 1,186 asylum seekers under those rules, but the number of people claiming asylum in this country is absolutely enormous—33,780 in 2017. I understand—so we seem to return a very small number to the safe countries through which they came.

It might be an accident of geography, but we are surrounded by safe countries—pretty much all those 33,780 asylum claimants will have come through one, two, three or more safe countries before reaching our shores. Under the EU regulation, they should be returned to the first safe country in which they arrived. Those EU countries, however, do not fingerprint arrivals when they come in, so no documentation proves that they entered the EU via Italy, Greece or Spain. Especially before we leave the EU, we should insist that our present European partners enforce the regulation.

What will we do once we have left the European Union? Non-EU countries are attached to the Dublin regulation, so the idea that we have to be in the EU for it to work is simply not the case. Are we preparing the ground so that, once we leave, we can still be a member of the convention and return asylum seekers?

I also understand that 80,813 asylum applications were refused or withdrawn between 2010 and 2016, which is 80,813 asylum claimants whose claims were refused or withdrawn. Is that figure correct, and is it correct that of that number only 26,659, or 33%, were actually deported? If we are to turn down people applying for asylum in this country, we need to deport them, because they are not legal asylum claimants—but we are simply not doing that. The problem is that if those people stay in this country, even though their claim was illegal, after five or more years they can claim indefinite leave to remain. That whole problem is fuelling people coming to this country illegally: basically, they know that they can get away with it.

Civitas published an excellent report recently. The author was one David Wood, who was dangerously overqualified: he worked at the Home Office for nine years, including as deputy chief executive of the UK Border Agency and as director-general of immigration enforcement; and before that he was 31 years in the Metropolitan police. He probably knows what he is talking about. I agree absolutely with what he makes clear:

“There needs to be a two-pronged approach to the problem: to reduce the numbers of illegal immigrants who enter in the first place, and to improve the rate of removal for those who are refused asylum.”

The report goes on:

“The difficulty is that if claimants know that all they have to do is to reach the UK, or Europe, claim asylum, and then disappear if the claim fails…then that is an incentive to pay criminals and take the risk of crossing the Mediterranean and, ultimately, the English Channel. The asylum system then becomes a tool of abuse for those we, as a country, have not provided with
[Mr Hollobone]

an entitlement to be here. Once an individual has been in a
country unlawfully for a number of years, the courts are very
reluctant to order their removal and many can then regularise
their stay. Again, the unlawful entrants know this, and the systems
incentivise deceptive behavior.”

He is absolutely right about that. What will the Minister
do to tackle the issue?

A lot of the asylum seekers who cross the English
Channel in small boats are, I understand, Iranians.

4.34 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.47 pm

On resuming—

Mr Hollobone: I shall draw my remarks to a close.

What nationality are the people crossing the English
channel illegally? It is reported in the media that most of
them are Iranian. I understand that is fuelled by
Serbia giving Iranians visa-free access to Serbia for a
four-month period. Some 40,000 Iranians took advantage
of that and are seeking to disperse themselves around
the EU, including coming to these shores. Apparently,
we let 63% of Iranians in; France keeps 69% of Iranian
applicants out. Two and a half thousand Iranians applied
for asylum here each year between 2008 and 2017—more
than in any other EU country except Germany. Why are
they all seeking asylum in this country and not in other
EU countries on the way? Less than 4% of the total
have been forcibly removed or have chosen to leave.
What action have we taken or are we taking with the
Serbian Government to ensure that the visa programme
is closed down?

This is a big issue of huge concern to many people.
We must be able to defend our coastline from illegal
immigration. We must not encourage, by either doing
nothing or doing very little, the people traffickers who
are driving this horrible trade that puts many lives at
risk. Above all, we want to ensure we have secure
borders and can control who comes here and who does
not.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): The Minister
has until 5.13 pm, if she wishes to extend her remarks
until then. That is because the previous debate finished
early and we have been interrupted by Divisions.

4.49 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): It is
always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,
Sir Christopher. Thank you for that clarification about
how long I may speak for.

It is a great credit to my hon. Friend the Member for
Kettering (Mr Hollobone) that he secured this important
debate. As many Members will know, this issue first
came to prominence over the festive period, but it
started significantly before that. We are very conscious
that since October there has been a sharp increase in the
number of migrants attempting to cross the channel
to the UK in small boats. During 2018, more than
500 migrants, most of them Iranian, attempted to travel
to the UK on small vessels. Some 80% of them made
their attempts in the last three months of the year. As a
result, the Home Secretary announced a major incident
and this issue has become an operational priority for
the Home Office.

The decision to announce a major incident was taken
not least to protect the lives of those attempting to
make this dangerous crossing; my hon. Friend was
absolutely right to point out how perilous it is. However,
we have also taken because we have an absolute duty to
protect the border and stop organised crime gangs
exploiting vulnerable individuals who want to come
here by sending them through the busiest shipping lane
in the world. That is why we must stop this incredibly
dangerous route becoming the new normal for those
wanting to enter the UK illegally.

My hon. Friend pointed out the hazards to individual
migrants and shipping, but there is also a very real
hazard to brave volunteers from the Royal National
Lifeboat Institution, many of whom have been deployed
from Dover to effect rescues in the channel, and to
coastguard and Border Force officials, who have been
on both our cutters and the coastal patrol vessels.

My hon. Friend was right to point out that this
migration is driven very much by organised crime gangs.
Just last month, five members of an organised crime
group received a combined custodial sentence of 21 years
and 10 months for smuggling migrants across the
border, and last year alone, Immigration Enforcement’s
criminal and financial investigation teams successfully
interrupted 405 events of organised crime groups and
their activity.

As well as those investigations, the Home Secretary
has redeployed two Border Force cutters from overseas
to the channel. While they are returning, other Border
Force vessels have been supplemented by a Royal Navy
offshore patrol vessel. There has been some criticism
from people who ask why the cutters have not returned
sooner. It is important to note that those vessels are
designed and built to work around coastal areas rather
than to make longer distance or open ocean deployments.

For the crews to transit the bay of Biscay during winter—
especially while deep Atlantic pressures are sweeping
across, causing high swells, at times of up to 14 metres—is
a dangerous pursuit, which must not be taken carelessly.
I fully support the principle that the safety of our
Border Force commanders, crews and vessels is paramount.

All essential maintenance activity has now been carried
out on the cutters. Both are fully crewed and await
a favourable weather window to return to the UK safely
and securely. Currently, our forecast for their return is
early February. Upon their return, we will have four
cutters available to operate in the channel, but Members
will appreciate that I will not discuss operational deployment
in detail. As I said, until the cutters’ return, we are
supplementing coverage with a Royal Navy vessel. In
addition to the cutters, we have Border Force coastal
patrol vessels in place. I visited Dover over the Christmas
period to see the great work Border Force officers are
doing there. As the Home Secretary said last week, we
have also started to deploy aerial surveillance of the
English channel. However, Members will appreciate
that is covert surveillance and I do not wish to
discuss those actions in detail.

It is important to note that we have not taken those
actions alone. We have worked very closely with the
French authorities to tackle the issue. Around 40% of
people who attempted the crossing last year were either disrupted by French law enforcement or returned to France via French agencies. Just last week, along with the French Interior Minister, Christophe Castaner, I visited the joint co-ordination and information centre in Calais to see at first hand the great co-operation between French and British authorities. In London last week, the Home Secretary and Mr Castaner signed a joint action plan to commit to reinforcing our border control. That builds on the 2018 Sandhurst treaty and demonstrates our determination to secure our shared border.

Through those efforts, we have reduced the number of individuals attempting the crossing from around 250 in December to 90 so far in January. However, we must not be complacent, and I am determined that we make further efforts to deter both the facilitators and the individuals who seek to make the crossing.

As Members will be aware, there is a widely accepted principle that those seeking asylum should claim it in the first safe country they reach, be it France or elsewhere. Therefore, if we establish that a migrant first entered another EU member state, we will always seek to return them to that state, in accordance with the Dublin regulation. For arrivals from safe non-EU states, asylum claims in the UK may be deemed inadmissible if the claimant has already been recognised as a refugee or given similar protection, if they have claimed asylum elsewhere, or if they have already spent five months in a safe country in which they could have claimed asylum.

We expect refugees to claim at the first reasonable opportunity. Indeed, that is a widely held international principle, and it certainly does not involve travelling through safe countries to reach the UK. Upholding that principle does not mean we will remove those who face persecution to their country. However, we will seek to return migrants to the first safe country in which they should have claimed asylum. Last week, a small number of migrants who entered the UK by small boat over Christmas were returned to France.

In the majority of cases, if a migrant is picked up in UK waters they are taken to the UK, and if they are picked up in French waters they are taken to France. The action plan we signed with France last week makes a commitment that migrants encountered in the channel will be taken to the nearest safe port, in accordance with international maritime law. Too often, migrants in the channel dictated to those who came to their rescue where they should be taken. That is not right, and I have asked officials to do all they can to prevent that “asylum shopping”, whether on land or at sea.

It is an established principle that those in need of protection should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, and if we establish that a migrant first entered another EU member state, we will seek to return them there, in accordance with the Dublin regulation. We do not want people to think that if they leave a safe country such as France and get to Britain they will get to stay, which is why we are working out, with our French counterparts, ways to increase the number of returns we make.

As part of the joint action plan agreed last week, the UK and France made a renewed commitment to return migrants who attempt to cross the channel to the country they came from. That plan, which comes into force immediately and builds on the existing framework of co-operation in the Sandhurst treaty, states specifically:

“Migrants rescued at sea will be taken to a port of safety in accordance with international maritime law. The respective maritime authorities will liaise with each other about rescue operations to provide mutual assistance as necessary at sea, and to determine the appropriate port of safety for a rescued migrant.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering rightly raised the issue of funding. The UK has agreed to allocate more than £6 million to support France’s comprehensive regional action plan. As he pointed out, that has led to additional surveillance and security on French beaches and ports, as well as greater co-ordination between the French authorities on land and at sea. Just over half the investment will come from money already allocated under the Sandhurst treaty, which was signed back in January 2018, and an additional £3.2 million of new funding will be used for equipment and measures to tackle illegal migration via small boats.

The structures in place to co-ordinate operations in the channel include the joint maritime operations co-ordination centre and the national maritime information centre. They are both supported administratively by Border Force, but the Department for Transport is responsible for their governance. The Border Force maritime intelligence bureau and maritime co-ordination centre also maintain a close dialogue with the French authorities operating both at sea and in the air.

The UK’s obligations to those seeking asylum are clearly defined in UK law. Those obligations will continue to be met after Brexit, and the UK will continue to respect refugee and asylum claimants. The EU principles for asylum claims will continue to apply to those arriving after Brexit, and the UK will continue to abide by the Dublin regulation, throughout the implementation period, but my hon. Friend will be aware that we have not opted in to Dublin IV. The UK’s position on granting protection to those who need it will not change as a result of leaving the EU. As well as providing sanctuary to those who need it, we intend to continue to work together at every point in the migrant journey, to address push factors, to importantly tackle organised crime and to limit pull factors and abuse of claims.

Mr Hollobone: I am listening to this good speech very closely. One of the pull factors for asylum seekers is that so many of those who make an asylum claim that is then rejected get to stay here anyway. Some two thirds of rejected asylum claimants remain in this country, which is an appalling figure. What will Her Majesty’s Government do about that?

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. He will be conscious that I have been in post as Minister of State for Immigration for a year now. One of the real concerns we have is how we address people who remain here without status and without a right given to them by the courts to be here. Both my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I are working very hard on promoting voluntary returns and, where appropriate, using means of returning people to their safe country of origin by enforced measures. That does not always make us popular. I am conscious that we have an absolute duty to uphold our asylum system, to make it robust and to make it firm but fair, and part of that process is indeed returns.

My hon. Friend also mentioned pull factors in his speech, with specific reference to Iranians and he asked me to confirm that the majority of those making these
small vessel crossings are Iranian. We believe in the region of 80% are Iranian, so that is a very high proportion. He also commented on the visa route through Serbia. I met—I am not sure if it was last week or the week before—the Serbian ambassador to raise this. She shared our concerns that Serbia had been used as a transit country. The visa route is now closed, but we are having close co-ordination with Serbia about the problem that has occurred there. The ambassador was positive about the role that Serbia could play, working with the UK.

There are many pull factors when it comes specifically to Iranians coming to the UK, one of which is language. I am well aware from my own constituency that a high number of Iranian citizens have come here, largely back in the 1970s. They have settled in the UK and been very successful. One of the big pull factors that we see for migration, throughout the middle east and north Africa region and beyond, is that when family members have come here, migrants often use that as reason to choose the UK, rather than other safe countries. The Home Secretary has been very clear on this point, and I hope I have been today as well. It is firmly our view that people should claim asylum in the first safe country and not the last, which in many cases is the UK.

Our position on granting protection will not change, as I said. We will still provide people with sanctuary, but we must continue with a strategy on the whole route of migration. The focus at the moment is very much on the channel, but we continue our work with our EU partners and beyond, across the MENA region, in the Aegean and the Mediterranean, looking at those strong routes of migration and working out how we can best counteract them.

Some of the best work that the UK does in counteracting the pull factors is through our extensive aid programmes, led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, that make sure people can be safe, whether it be in the countries immediately surrounding Syria or further afield.

It is a month since the major incident was declared and the number of arrivals and attempts is around half that of the previous month. I would not want my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering or other Members to think that we are in any way complacent about that. We have seen these crossings attempted during perhaps the most dangerous part of the year. As spring and summer are approaching—I say that somewhat optimistically—it is imperative that we remain vigilant and continue our work with the French, to make sure that they too keep up the surveillance and observation on their beaches. When I was in Calais last week, I was conscious that it is a sparsely populated coastline, which is difficult to monitor closely. They have aerial surveillance and the French have been proactive in making sure they are playing their part. The Mayor of Calais was forceful in his message to me about how we could provide further help. It is important that we continue our work on a joint basis.

I am pleased by the progress we have made thus far, but more remains to be done. It is imperative that we go forward in the vein of joint co-operation, because migration across the channel is sadly not an issue that we will solve on our own.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered illegal seaborne immigration across the English Channel.
Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): We now come to the next debate, which can continue with the benefit of unused time until 13 minutes past six.

5.5 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered World Cancer Day.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for being here to debate an important issue that sadly affects too many of our constituents.

This debate comes ahead of what will be the 20th World Cancer Day, which will take place on Monday 4 February. I am delighted that following a suggestion from Elaine Monro, who is a constituent of mine and a Cancer Research UK volunteer, the Palace of Westminster will mark World Cancer Day by lighting up in pink. As far as I am aware, this will be the first time that Westminster will be illuminated for World Cancer Day, so I would like to place on the record my thanks to the Speaker and the Lord Speaker for agreeing to that request.

World Cancer Day is an initiative led by the Union for International Cancer Control. Each year, the global cancer community is united in seeking to raise awareness about cancer prevention and treatment, and about the importance of Governments working together, tackling cancer globally. Last year’s World Cancer Day involved more than 1,000 activities in 139 countries, culminating in half a million social media mentions and over 14,000 press articles and broadcasts in 145 countries worldwide.

Cancer is a global problem. Last year, more than 18 million people worldwide were diagnosed with cancer, but the story of those patients varies hugely depending on where they were born; many countries have no access to basic treatments, such as radiotherapy. This is all about working together—a global push to tackle a global issue. As Cancer Research UK has put it:

“No single person, organisation, or country is going to beat cancer on its own. We must all work together.”

In the UK, a number of charities mark World Cancer Day through campaigns or fundraising activities. Cancer Research UK and CLIC Sargent both sell wristbands, which I am pleased that I and colleagues are wearing today, to raise funds and awareness about the day. Children with Cancer UK and the Institute of Cancer Research are also running campaigns to coincide with World Cancer Day, and in previous years many other charities, including Macmillan Cancer Support, Marie Curie, Breast Cancer Now and Anthony Nolan, have also marked the day. Events are taking place across the United Kingdom, from the Scottish cancer prevention conference in Edinburgh to Cancer Research UK’s winter run in London.

I pay tribute to each and every one of those charities, their staff and volunteers; they do incredible work. They are truly a credit to our country and contribute significantly to the global effort to tackle cancer, doing hugely valuable work with global partners. Cancer Research UK is the largest independent funder of cancer research in the world and it has played a role in developing eight of the world’s top 10 cancer drugs. Can the Minister touch upon how the Government support this work and how they help the UK to continue to contribute to the global effort to tackle cancer? I know that some charities have concerns about the impact that Brexit may have on the UK’s continued contribution to this work.

There is some great work being carried out in my constituency; I shall mention a few examples. The Cancer Research UK team from Selkirk, led by Elaine Monro, has developed an official tartan scarf, which is produced in the Borders by Lochcarron and continues to sell like hotcakes, not only in Selkirk and Scotland, but throughout the United Kingdom. The Marie Curie team in the Borders, who now help patients with terminal illnesses generally, not just cancer, do some incredible work caring for people in their final days. I must not fail to mention that I will be running the London marathon in a few weeks to help raise funds to support my local Marie Curie nursing team. I hope that by raising £5,000 I shall be able to support their work in caring for people with terminal illness in my constituency.

In partnership with Macmillan, NHS Borders runs a dedicated, world-leading cancer centre at the Borders General Hospital, which pulls together specialist staff and treatments all in one location. NHS Borders is very good at meeting its cancer treatment waiting times, as well as targets for cancer screening, not least because of that Macmillan centre.

Although World Cancer Day is focused on tackling cancer globally, we are understandably focused on the UK’s record. Like most other developed nations, the UK has higher rates of cancer, but we also have quite high mortality rates—just above the average, according to the 2018 Global Cancer Observatory figures, and higher than many other developed nations. Given that the UK leads the way in vast amounts of cancer research, and that we have some of the world’s best cancer professionals and a universal health service, our mortality rates are simply too high.

Cancer continues to affect far too many people in the UK. More than 360,000 Brits are diagnosed with cancer each year, and that is expected to rise to the equivalent of one new case every minute by 2035. Every day, 12 children and young people are diagnosed with cancer, which remains the biggest killer of children by disease in the United Kingdom.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his excellent speech and for securing this debate. When he mentions children’s cancer, he will be aware of a case that I have raised in Parliament and a guest that I had at Downing Street last week. Abbie Main, who sadly died on Christmas day two years ago, died of a very rare disease—sarcoma. Her legacy, through the work she did, is an incredible amount of work to raise funds for research into cancer, great work is also done by local charities such as Abbie’s Sparkle Foundation, raising money for people who have to live with cancer, to give them better facilities and better care in hospital.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point; I was delighted to meet Abbie’s brother at the Downing Street Burns supper last week. He has done an incredible amount of work to raise funds for Abbie’s Sparkle Foundation in memory of his sister. He is one of many examples, not only in Moray but in all our
Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important debate to the House. Does he welcome the initiative in my constituency, run by the Maggie’s Centre in Dundee, which helps and supports many people who are suffering? We had a penguin parade in which 80 penguins were decorated across Tayside, and children through their summer holidays had to go on a penguin search. In the end, we raised £540,000 for the local Maggie’s Centre. It just shows that there are initiatives all across Scotland and the United Kingdom that are beneficial in raising as much money as possible.

John Lamont: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that example, which demonstrates that it is not just in large cities, but smaller communities, whether they be in Angus and Dundee, in Moray or across our county, that people are coming together to produce such great work to tackle this dreadful disease.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. One issue that is not often raised is that of people with cancer who have disabilities. Wendy Douglas, a constituent of mine, died of breast cancer aged just 36. She had severe autism, and her cancer was caught too late because she was not able to communicate any symptoms or pain verbally to her family or doctors. Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Wendy’s mother Eileen, who raises money for all kinds of cancer charities, and particularly for her work trying to raise awareness of cancer in those who cannot communicate it?

John Lamont: Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising a powerful case and example. I suppose the question is what would happen were it not for all these volunteers, raising huge amounts of money and raising awareness around breast cancer means that women come forward quickly, but with bowel cancer people do not? Research done in the west of Scotland showed that the biggest delay was in going to the GP. We need to get people to talk about it, be open about it and go and get help.

John Lamont: I could not agree more. There is an awareness issue. Often, when people develop some symptoms that are unsure of, they are nervous about going to the doctor. People need to be encouraged to step forward and go to their GP, to ensure that if there is an opportunity to get an early diagnosis, that is achieved, because the results are clearly much more positive if that is the case.

That is why we have early diagnosis targets across the UK, and why it is so serious that in Scotland, more than 20% of patients are waiting for longer than the six-week standard for diagnostic tests. Too many people are waiting too long for treatment. NHS boards north of the border are meant to take no more than two months to start treatment, but that target is being missed for every type of cancer. In some health boards, one in five patients did not meet that target. I am sure we have all received emails from patients who are faced with an agonising wait for treatment, knowing that they have cancer. While the missed targets are by no means unique to Scotland, I hope that we can all come together here—Scottish National party colleagues included—to call on the Scottish Government to make clear that that needs to get better.

I should also be interested to hear the Minister’s views on whether any consideration has been given to reviewing treatment target times with a view to introducing faster treatment targets for certain types of cancer. It strikes me as odd that across the UK our targets are the same for all cancers, regardless of type.

One significant reason for the time taken to diagnose and treat is problems to do with workforce. Demand for tests is only going to increase, due to a growing and ageing population, but we already do not have enough staff in a range of areas.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me on the impact of no longer having nursing bursaries? When I was a nurse, I had a nursing bursary. I could not have trained without that. We really must bring back the bursary. It is all right saying, “We
have all these vacancies and we are going to have all these nurses,” but if people do not train, we will not have the people to fill those vacancies.

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point. There is a range of options that we need to consider. I recently met my local NHS health board, and I meet a number of my GPs frequently. There are vacancies in all different parts of the health service, and we need to consider how we get more people in to do the jobs that we need. There is a particular challenge in my constituency—many rural communities do not have enough GPs or get enough nurses. Bursaries may be part of that. There are a range of things that we need to do, and that the Scottish Government and the UK Government can do, to address those issues.

For example, there is a 10% vacancy rate for radiology consultants across Scotland. One in five of the current workforce are expected to retire over the next five years. So, yes, there are challenges just now, but there are future challenges coming down the line.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He talks about access to existing treatments, but does he agree that more work has to be done on conditions for which treatment is not yet available? The late Tessa Jowell worked very hard on this issue, right up to the end of her life, trying to improve access to new treatments and to improve care for people with conditions for which there is perhaps no treatment out there. Does he agree that we should pay tribute to Tessa Jowell and continue that work?

John Lamont: I absolutely agree. We need to do much more to promote awareness of those conditions. I will come on later to the availability of drugs.

The Scottish Government recognise that the high number of vacancies is a problem, but missed their target for increasing the number of nurse endoscopists by 40%. In England, nurse vacancies are similarly too high. The availability of drugs is also an issue that concerns charities and patients alike. The most high-profile example is the breast cancer drug Perjeta, which was rejected for use three times in Scotland but was finally approved just a few weeks ago. Quicker and more cost-effective access to the latest and best treatments must be a priority in future.

I know that colleagues will want to press the Minister on what the UK Government are doing to tackle cancer in England, but all these issues need to be addressed across all parts of our United Kingdom. As a Scottish MP, I am conscious that the Minister is not directly responsible for the cancer waiting times and treatments for my constituents. However, UK-wide approaches should be taken to help us tackle cancer head on, together.

World Cancer Day is all about recognising that cancer knows no boundaries, and that individual Governments cannot address these challenges in isolation. That gives rise to the question: are the UK Government and devolved Governments working as well together on this issue as they should be? For example, should we buy some drugs and equipment on a UK-wide basis? Current practice is that four separate bodies approve new drugs across the UK. While that allows different parts of the UK to make their own decisions, surely a UK-wide approach would make sense in some cases. We could make ultra-orphan drugs more affordable or use economies of scale to deliver common drugs at lower cost.

I am therefore interested in the Minister’s views on this suggestion. Have there been any discussions with the devolved Administrations about this possibility? Are health boards across the UK as good as they can be at talking to each other and sharing best practice? Representing a constituency on the border with England, I am often too see examples of that border acting as a barrier to co-operation. I certainly hope that that is not the case when it comes to cancer treatment.

I hugely welcome the extra funding coming the NHS’s way, which will of course mean an extra £2 billion a year for the Scottish Government to spend on health, if they choose. Will the Minister outline what that means for cancer treatment in England, and how much of that extra funding will be used to improve treatment and reduce cancer waiting times?

Can we do more to support families with the cost of cancer treatment? Parents spend an average £600 a month in additional expenses as a result of their child’s active cancer treatment, much of that on travel costs. Young people in my constituency often have to make a 100-mile round trip to Edinburgh for tests and treatment. Children’s cancer charity CLIC Sargent is calling for a cancer patient travel fund, as well as a review of the disability living allowance and personal independence payments, to backdate young cancer patients’ financial support to their day of diagnosis. I certainly think that these are reasonable suggestions.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): As a parent who supported a child through cancer, I know at first hand how much a child going through cancer costs and the financial strain, as well as the emotional and physical strain, on parents and families. Universal credit does not take account of the cost of cancer; both parents often have to give up work to support one child in hospital and other children at home or at school. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is absolutely crippling for those families?

John Lamont: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for sharing her experience. This all needs to be looked at. As I said, DLA and PIP should at the very least be backdated to the date of diagnosis. Additional support, particularly for parents like those in my constituency who have to travel such long distances to access treatment, should be factored into the calculation of how much they might be entitled to. We need to ensure that the system at least recognises those extra financial pressures.

Dr Whitford: I utterly agree with the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on financial support. Macmillan Cancer Support estimates that having cancer costs £570 a month, which is very difficult for some families. Will the hon. Gentleman suggest to the Minister that removing the expensive parking charges at hospitals in England would make a little difference? At the moment, a parent being stuck in hospital for eight hours and then paying through the nose for parking adds insult to injury.
John Lamont: I am grateful for that point. I am certain aware of constituents, including hospital staff, facing huge penalties from the health board for parking at Borders General Hospital, because of the limited parking spaces—that is a consequence of the hospital’s parking arrangements. There are lots of dynamics, but Scotland has just as many issues as England.

It is great to see so many colleagues present today. I am pleased that Parliament will mark World Cancer Day in such a public and clear way on Monday. We have made great strides in treating cancer in recent years, thanks in no small part to the work of charities, researchers and health professionals across every part of our United Kingdom. World Cancer Day is an opportunity for us all to come together to make a strong commitment to continue the fight against this dreadful disease.

5.27 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): As I mentioned earlier, I have personal experience of cancer, both as a parent and a child; my mother died of breast cancer when I was five years old. From a very young age I have seen the impact of cancer on families. I have also seen treatments improve over the decades, from the time that my mother was suffering and had what appeared to me, at that young age, to be fairly rudimentary treatments, to what are now much more sophisticated treatments, which are available to children and adults in centres of excellence such as the Christie Hospital in Manchester.

The support has also evolved greatly. I pay tribute not only to the very brave people going through cancer, and their families who support them, but to amazing organisations such as Mummy’s Star, a national charity set up in my constituency to support families with children whose parent is dying or has died of cancer. It does amazing work counselling children and helping them through the process of treatment and grief, and often bereavement as well.

I also pay tribute to our hospices. Blythe House Hospice in my constituency has a brilliant “Breast Friends” group, which I have visited and spoken to. They are very brave survivors of cancer, often two or possibly even three times over. The support they get from the local hospice and community really helps them to keep going through the emotionally and physically gruelling trauma of cancer treatment.

We have very particular concerns in High Peak. At the end of last year, just after Breast Cancer Awareness Month, breast services for patients in north Derbyshire were withdrawn from our local hospital. As that is our nearest hospital, it was incredibly traumatic for patients and families, who were faced with possibly very long distances to travel for treatment. It is extremely difficult to drive and no public transport is available. That is exceedingly worrying for them, on top of the worry and trauma of their diagnosis and treatment.

Services were also withdrawn from gastroenterology patients in Macclesfield Hospital in north Derbyshire—our other nearby hospital. On both occasions, that was due to staffing shortages; there are 42,000 vacancies for registered nurses. I urge the Minister to look at the amount of investment that is going in to support not just the nurses, but the radiotherapists and radiologists who are so important in cancer diagnosis and care.

Early diagnosis is important for people’s outcomes. We do not want to see any more people than have to go through treatment, and we certainly do not want them to find out about their cancer at a late stage, when it is much more difficult for them to recover and when the prognosis is much worse.

I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) about the costs of cancer. Again, universal credit is an extremely complicated system for people—not just the parents of children with cancer but cancer sufferers themselves—to go through. It took six hours at a computer for one young man. Neil, who is cited by Macmillan Cancer Support, to complete the claim form for universal credit while suffering from the treatment for a brain tumour. We are putting cancer patients through an absolutely sub-human system when they should already have as much support as possible.

I ask the Minister to speak to colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions about the strain and lack of support available to parents of children with cancer or to cancer sufferers in claiming universal credit. At the moment, almost one in five patients with cancer struggles to pay their bills, which should not be the case for people who need to put all their efforts and energy into getting well.

5.32 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this important debate.

It is staggering that about 4,600 women and more than 20 men in Scotland are diagnosed with breast cancer each year. Sadly, few people, particularly males, realise that men can also be affected. My researcher was diagnosed with breast cancer nearly 16 years ago and remains eternally grateful for the care and support she received from the national health service. Her paternal grandmother and great-aunt were of a different, less fortunate generation and lost their lives to breast cancer shortly after diagnosis, although a delay in seeking assistance was undoubtedly a factor in their demise.

Regrettably, previous generations were often reticent to seek assistance, perhaps due to a lack of knowledge or embarrassment. Encouraging openness and interaction, as World Cancer Day does, and media campaigns from the national health service and various cancer charities are vital if we are to empower people through education and advocacy, including peer support, to improve their quality of life and life expectancy following a cancer diagnosis.

Dr Whitford: I welcome the mention of embarrassment. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that we have a particular job to do with men to get beyond the embarrassment of talking about bowels, bowel motions and other bodily functions? If people cannot talk about it with their families, they will struggle to talk about it with a GP.

Bill Grant: I totally agree; I am of the embarrassed generation. It is challenging for males—I concede that it is men in particular—to go to the general practitioner, but we need to educate them about making that first
contact and being conscious of the risk. It is particularly my generation; the generation following are a bit less self-conscious and more eager to go to the GP, where they will find that help.

As a member of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, I have become acutely aware of the importance and benefits of research. In 2014, the city of Glasgow, not far from my constituency, hosted the European breast cancer conference. Such conferences bring together experts in their respective fields to share knowledge and experience for the benefit of patients and to consider preventive measures for the future, such as developments in immunotherapy that harness the body’s immune system to target cancer cells. As I understand it, such developments may be able to complement, if not replace, radiotherapy and chemotherapy, the side effects of which many breast cancer patients find more challenging than the cancer itself.

Treatment has very much improved, recognising the importance of body image in an era when the media often seek to portray the perfect person. The charity Breast Cancer Care stages regular fashion shows in which those who take to the catwalk have themselves been cancer patients. The male and female models, resplendent in their latest outfits, send a very clear message that they have beaten or are robustly fighting cancer.

Tamoxifen, a common medication for breast cancer treatment, is now just one of a range of drugs available to patients. It was heartening to learn of the Scottish Medicines Consortium’s decision to approve the life-extending drug Perjeta for routine use in treating secondary breast cancer on Scotland’s national health service. Compared with existing treatments, the drug apparently has the potential to offer valuable time to those with incurable HER2-positive secondary breast cancer.

Nowadays, cancer is treated by multi-disciplinary teams that include GPs, surgeons, oncologists, radiographers, radiologists and clinical nurse specialists. It is crucial that we have appropriate succession planning so that we can replace those vital experts as they reach retirement age or change career for whatever reason. It is quite concerning that 20% of breast radiologists in Scotland are predicted to retire before 2025, according to the charity Breast Cancer Now. We need to get the wheels in motion to replace those very important individuals.

Cancer is a challenge to our society. It changes people’s lives in different ways, and sadly some go on to develop lymphoedema. However, collectively we can meet that challenge. Some countries have a lesser incidence, so it may be prudent, as an aspect of self-help, to reflect on diet and lifestyle choices in the UK that may have a bearing on development or outcomes. The potential effects of obesity, cigarettes and alcohol need to be seriously addressed. That apart, we need to focus on the future needs of the researchers and medical professionals to protect the population who are at risk of cancer.

Finally, my constituents and I thank the national health service professionals, the volunteer drivers, the penguins of Dundee, the marathon runners from the borders and the charities. They all make the challenge of living and dealing with cancer that wee bit easier.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I will keep my speech fairly brief. I speak as an ex-nurse who worked in gynaecology outpatients clinics every Tuesday morning and as a mum whose daughter died of breast cancer at just 35. She was not overweight and she did not smoke—sometimes it is just the luck of the draw, sadly.

I will make a few short points, but the most important is that although we talk about a lot of issues related to cancer, we need to consider the people—the patients with families and lives. It is not just a disease in the abstract; it affects people. That should make us determined that, austerity or no austerity, those people should get the very best treatment possible.

We must ensure that we have the best screenings processes, because everybody knows that early detection means more positive outcomes. We need to put an end to people not being called for mammograms or waiting 12 weeks for the result of a smear test, as they do where I live—surely we can do better than that. If people have a positive diagnosis, treatment must be prompt. There should be no geographical inequalities in access to care or to a clinical nurse specialist, whether for the psychological or physical manifestations of disease.

That level of treatment should be there and everybody should be able to access it, but that is just not happening. I work with a lot of cancer groups because of my experience, and it really is not equal out there. As for surgery—fancy going into hospital and having the surgery cancelled! That is what happened to a constituent of mine. It is stressful enough going in, never mind having it cancelled and then having to go back. I spoke to another constituent recently who could not access a particular drug. People just should not have those battles; the disease is enough of a battle in itself.

If a patient is lucky enough to be successfully treated, it is vital that they can access regular follow-ups as necessary. I am a patron of Westminster Health Forum and we had a day last summer when we looked at cancer treatment in the round. One of the things we talked about was having Skype sessions instead of cancer patients having to trail all the way to a hospital and sit around. Because there are not enough nurses or doctors—I speak from experience—appointments are often an hour or an hour and a half behind. People spend hours and hours sitting around when they could have had a Skype session. That is not for every patient, but some can do it. It is about looking at what is most appropriate for that patient.

We must ensure that patient experience surveys are completed so that we know what is happening to patients and can collate that and act on it. If the disease progresses, we must ensure psychological support and medical treatment are as good as they can be. There should not be variations in end of life care. There are not enough nurses in our NHS. We have nurses in hospitals at the end of life, and we have nurses in out-patient clinics. They are a vital part of the treatment. We have lots of vacancies and apprenticeships are not being taken up at the rate that was hoped for. We need nursing bursaries back. It is not just me and Labour politicians who are saying that; the Royal College of Nursing is saying that, too. We need more nurses and more radiologists, and to get that we need bursaries.
Patients should not have to struggle with the benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) talked about filling out a form. I remember the film “I, Daniel Blake” was shown recently and a very thoughtless person—a senior politician—put something on social media saying, “It is just a film, you know.” Actually, it is what people are going through. What was said was shameful, and I do not think any apology was ever forthcoming.

Recently, I had a constituent whose husband died of cancer. He should have been on a very high level of benefits at the end, but his benefits were messed up. She tried to claim them after his death because she had to borrow money to bury him. My office fought and fought for several weeks, and we got that backdated money, but if we had not done that, she would have not got it. She would still be paying money back for that funeral, and that is shameful.

As politicians, I think we have the best of intentions, and I mean everyone in every party, but it is important that those intentions and words are matched by effective actions that ensure that people get the treatment they deserve.

5.42 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing the debate and giving us all an opportunity to participate. This issue is very close to my heart. My father battled and had the victory over cancer three times during his lifetime, but watching him and my mother go through it was incredibly tough. My dad survived those three times due to the clinical and surgical skills of the doctor, the care of the nurses, who were excellent, and, as a man of faith, the prayers of God’s people. That is the experience of so many people throughout my constituency and throughout the UK.

Cancer is no man’s respecter and the reality is that in our lifetime one out of two of us in this place will have an experience of it. I was in touch with CLIC Sargent—indeed, it was in touch with all of us. It is a wonderful charity that is very active in my constituency and I am happy to support it. It gave me the following figures, which are simply heartbreaking. Some 4,450 children and young people under 25 are diagnosed with cancer every year. That is 12 children and young people every day. Those are extremely worrying figures. Around four in five children and young people survive cancer for five years or more, yet cancer remains the disease that is the biggest killer of children and young people in the UK aged from one to 24 years old.

Cancer impacts on young people and parents’ mental health. Undergoing cancer treatment is challenging, isolating and deeply personal. Young people’s ability to cope is often seriously affected by the emotional pressures and the mental health impact of a diagnosis and months of treatment. CLIC Sargent’s 2017 “Hidden costs” report found that 79% of young people felt cancer had a serious impact on their emotional wellbeing. During their cancer treatment, 70% of young people experience depression, 85% experience loneliness, 90% experience anxiety and 42% experience panic attacks. More than half of parents—63%—say they experience depression during their child’s treatment. It affects not only the child, but the family and the parents. More than a third of parents experience panic attacks and 84% experience loneliness.

I stand with CLIC Sargent, Macmillan, Marie Curie and all the other charities that are too numerous to mention, but which do great work. They are asking the Government to improve support for young cancer patients and their parents by making changes to the way benefits such as PIPs and DLA are accessed. The stories that I have heard from others in the Chamber, in my constituency and elsewhere, and in the news are disgraceful. I know that the Minister is not responsible for the DWP, but he does, I believe, have compassion and a heart, and hopefully he will pass these issues on to the Minister who is responsible. I have written to that Minister about these matters as well.

Not only do I need to see change; the system needs to see change. As treatment starts immediately and often takes place a long way from home, the costs start building up from day one. There must be a review of access to DLA and personal independence payments for young cancer patients, so that they can get their financial support backdated from the day of diagnosis.

It is so important to have that financial support in place, because that worries the parents, the families, and everyone else at a time when they need that support most desperately.

Following the Prime Minister’s announcement in April 2018 of the establishment of a children’s funeral fund in England, I ask the Minister to further clarify when that fund will be introduced. Again, that is not his responsibility, but perhaps he can ask that question of the Minister who is responsible. Furthermore, will the Minister provide an update on what the Government are doing to ensure that parental bereavement leave, which would give all employed parents a right to two weeks’ leave if they lose a child, is ready to be introduced in 2020?

I will quickly mention the importance of partnerships between universities and businesses to develop cures for cancer and other diseases: Queen’s University Belfast does that extremely well, and that partnership works. I will also mention that I had the opportunity to speak with Bowel Cancer UK the other day. Every year in Northern Ireland, 1,100 people are diagnosed with bowel cancer and 400 people die. By 2035, 332,000 more lives could be lost to that disease in the UK. There are some things that Bowel Cancer UK has asked for, but I will not go into those in the time I have left.

These topics are heartbreaking, but they need to be addressed. I ask the Minister for a response, either in this place or in writing, on how changes are going to be made to support the families of children with cancer throughout the UK. How can we make these impossible, dark, soul-wrenching things a little bit better? We can make them better by using common sense, and using funding in appropriate ways to provide support as and when it is needed, lightening the load in the only way that we can. That will not take away the pain of watching a child go through this, or losing a child, but it will take away pressure that should not exist in the first place.

5.47 pm

**Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Sir Christopher, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing the debate and giving us all an opportunity to participate. This issue is very close to my heart. My father battled and had the victory over cancer three times during his lifetime, but watching him and my mother go through it was incredibly tough. My dad survived those three times due to the clinical and surgical skills of the doctor, the care of the nurses, who were excellent, and, as a man of faith, the prayers of God’s people. That is the experience of so many people throughout my constituency and throughout the UK.

Cancer is no man’s respecter and the reality is that in our lifetime one out of two of us in this place will have an experience of it. I was in touch with CLIC Sargent—indeed, it was in touch with all of us. It is a wonderful charity that is very active in my constituency and I am happy to support it. It gave me the following figures, which are simply heartbreaking. Some 4,450 children and young people under 25 are diagnosed with cancer every year. That is 12 children and young people every day. Those are extremely worrying figures. Around four in five children and young people survive cancer for five years or more, yet cancer remains the disease that is the biggest killer of children and young people in the UK aged from one to 24 years old.

Cancer impacts on young people and parents’ mental health. Undergoing cancer treatment is challenging, isolating and deeply personal. Young people’s ability to cope is often seriously affected by the emotional pressures and the mental health impact of a diagnosis and months of treatment. CLIC Sargent’s 2017 “Hidden costs” report found that 79% of young people felt cancer had a serious impact on their emotional wellbeing. During their cancer treatment, 70% of young people experience depression, 85% experience loneliness, 90% experience anxiety and 42% experience panic attacks. More than half of parents—63%—say they experience depression during their child’s treatment. It affects not only the child, but the family and the parents. More than a third of parents experience panic attacks and 84% experience loneliness.

I stand with CLIC Sargent, Macmillan, Marie Curie and all the other charities that are too numerous to mention, but which do great work. They are asking the Government to improve support for young cancer patients and their parents by making changes to the way benefits such as PIPs and DLA are accessed. The stories that I have heard from others in the Chamber, in my constituency and elsewhere, and in the news are disgraceful. I know that the Minister is not responsible for the DWP, but he does, I believe, have compassion and a heart, and hopefully he will pass these issues on to the Minister who is responsible. I have written to that Minister about these matters as well.

Not only do I need to see change; the system needs to see change. As treatment starts immediately and often takes place a long way from home, the costs start building up from day one. There must be a review of access to DLA and personal independence payments for young cancer patients, so that they can get their financial support backdated from the day of diagnosis.

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5.47 pm
for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on having secured it. World Cancer Day reminds us all that although much progress has been made, there are still many challenges to be tackled in improving treatment, support and outcomes for individuals with cancer.

Today, the importance of World Cancer Day could not be greater. Macmillan Cancer Support estimates that 2.5 million people in the UK are currently living with cancer, and about another 360,000 people will be diagnosed with cancer this year, with nearly 1,000 diagnosed every day. Those people are our colleagues, neighbours, friends and family: everyone will have their own experience of a loved one who has been taken from them because of this dreadful illness. Tomorrow, I will be attending the funeral of my brother-in-law, Jimmy Boyle, who was taken from us by cancer. He was a loving husband to my sister Mary Jo and a fantastic father to my niece Lorna. Both spent the last six months caring for and looking after Jimmy, and both know that he will be in peaceful rest, free from pain, and will never stop loving them.

This Saturday, I will be attending a teenage cancer fundraiser with my other nieces, Eva and Lia, who, along with their friends, wanted to do something for teenagers who are living with cancer. It is my family’s experience and those of families across the country that motivate all of us in this House to campaign for better support for those living with cancer, or living with someone who has cancer. I am sure that other Members have been contacted in the days leading up to this debate, be it by those living with cancer, their loved ones, or charities fighting on their behalf. It is staggering to me that when a person is undergoing cancer treatment, as mentioned earlier, the average cost to their family is £600 a month. The idea that people undergoing treatment and their families should face such a financial burden at a time of emotional and personal distress is shocking, and we have heard from hon. Members about universal credit.

The UK, Welsh and Scottish Governments could and should do more to provide financial support for these families. Young Lives Vs Cancer has proposed that a young cancer patient travel fund should be established to help families with the cost of transport to and from treatment, as other Members have already mentioned. That is a great idea that is worth exploring and indeed we should look at reducing the cost of travel for treatment.

We should also look at improving the public transport links to our hospitals. My local bus and rail services are at their worst level. That is another debate. In my own area of North Lanarkshire, Breast Cancer Now estimates that around 120 local women develop breast cancer every year and it is expected that there will be a 27% increase in breast cancer diagnoses in Scotland by 2027. Yet Breast Cancer Now suggests that 20% of Scotland’s cancer radiologists will have retired by 2025.

I call on the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland to ensure that we recruit the next generation of radiologists, so that women can access the service they need. Whether we are considering breast cancer or other types of cancer, we must ensure that the NHS is properly funded and staffed and capable of improving the treatment, care and positive outcomes that those who are living with cancer deserve. That matters not just in Scotland; it matters here as well, and across the whole of the UK.

I conclude by paying tribute to my local Maggie’s Centre, the Lanarkshire Beatson and of course St Andrew’s Hospice, which cared for my brother-in-law, Jimmy, for their care and support, and the services that they provide for those living with cancer, their families and their friends, and I urge everyone in this House to show their support for World Cancer Day.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is great to have this debate on the 20th World Cancer Day and I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont)—we need shorter constituency names—on securing it.

Obviously, it is very clear in my record and from my previous speeches that I have been a breast cancer surgeon for over 30 years. When I graduated in the 1980s, the survival rate from breast cancer at five years was approximately 53%; we are now in the high 80s and approaching 90%. However, breast cancer is not just about survival. In those days, treatment was incredibly destructive. Women lost their breasts through mastectomy and had very harsh radiotherapy, the side effects of which were awful, and there was very little in the way of other forms of treatment.

Now, we practice much less destructive surgery; we have computed tomography-planned radiotherapy; and our drugs are designed and developed, such as the immunotherapy that the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) mentioned. So the treatment has moved on, the survival rate has moved on and the impact on patients has moved on.

Critical to that movement, as is said over and over, is early diagnosis; that is the importance of screening. However, what we are seeing in many screening programmes, particularly in breast cancer screening programmes, is a gradual fall-off. So it is important that we encourage people to attend the screening that they are suitable for, whether that is cervical screening or breast cancer screening, or—as I say—people putting poo in the post once they reach that age, examining themselves, and not being embarrassed to go and see a doctor.

We have raised this issue in previous discussions, but we are lucky enough in Scotland that bowel screening—the poo in the post programme—starts at 50, and because the endoscopy that results from a positive test does not just treat cancer but gives us the opportunity to remove a polyp, the incidence of bowel cancer in men in Scotland has fallen by 18%. So bowel cancer screening is not just finding cancer early; it is a chance to prevent the cancer from developing. The Government said last August that they would also move to that earlier screening age instead of 60, and I would be grateful to know from the Minister roughly when that change will happen.

However, what challenges screening, as Members have already talked about, is workforce. Radiology is not just an issue in Scotland; radiology is an issue right across the UK. I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer and our report last year—“A Mixed Picture”—showed very clearly that as three radiologists retire, they are likely to be replaced by only two.

The other group is endoscopers. If we are running screening, and if screening in England is going to start earlier, that will generate more endoscopies. The NHS is
not buildings and machines; it is people. That is a challenge for all of us and I have to say that unfortunately I think Brexit will make workforce more difficult as we go forward.

The number of cancers increases as we get older, as does the complexity of treatment. We are discovering new drugs by design, genetics and cell biology rather than just by accident, as many drugs in the past were found. We have to turn that around. We talk about access to a new drug that might be £100,000 a treatment, but how much cheaper it is to prevent the cancer in the first place? Most members of the public know that smoking is the No. 1 cause, but smoking has been going down, particularly since the smoking ban in the mid-2000s. In fact, lung cancer incidence in men is down by just over 17%. That means 17% of men not getting lung cancer, not having a big operation and not dying from it. There is absolutely no treatment that will achieve that.

What many people do not know is that obesity is the second commonest cause. We have discussed things such as childhood obesity strategies, and the need for a watershed on advertising, high-quality school meals and active transport, so that it is easier for people to maintain a healthy weight and to remain fit. We live in an obesogenic society; it is really hard for people to resist things when they are bombarded from every direction. Low-quality carbohydrate food is still much cheaper than fresh vegetables and protein. That always means people are slanted in the wrong direction.

Alcohol is also a cause of cancer. I am proud that, after five years of being dragged through the courts, the Scottish Government have managed to introduce minimum unit pricing, particularly to tackle white ciders—the really poor-quality alcohol at the lower end of the spectrum.

To tackle cancer, the best strategy is to prevent it. That requires a health-in-all-policies approach right across every Department and Government. As well as preventing cancer, that would prevent many of the chronic illnesses that cause debility in older life. As well as preventing cancer, it would prevent other suffering; we would improve the quality of life of our senior citizens. That is something we should all aspire to.

5.57 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for securing this timely debate, and the other hon. Members for their excellent contributions: my hon. Friends the Members for High Peak (Ruth George), for Lincoln (Karen Lee) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), and the hon. Members for Swindon North (Lorraine Winstone), for Central Ayrshire, for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), and for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford).

World Cancer Day gives us an opportunity to come together and celebrate how far we have come in cancer diagnosis, treatment and care. It also gives us a chance to reflect on what more needs to be done to fight cancer. The Minister and I have previously worked closely together as co-chairs, as we often say in debates, on breast cancer, as I also have with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire. That shows that all the main parties’ spokespersons are committed to working together on this issue.

Cancer is a very emotive issue, as we have heard in this debate in some passionate contributions. One in two of us will be affected by it in our lifetime. Most of us in this Chamber will be here today because of the personal effect that cancer has had on our or our family’s lives. In the UK alone, more than 360,000 people are diagnosed with cancer every year. That figure is expected to rise to more than half a million cancer cases every year by 2035. That is equivalent to one new case every minute. That makes the Prime Minister’s commitment to diagnose three in four cancers at an early stage by 2028 all the more ambitious.

Our NHS workforce do a fantastic job every day in caring for us and our loved ones, but as we have heard, there are chronic staff shortages across the NHS. There are vacancies for 102,000 staff, including 41,000 nurses. That makes it harder and harder for them to do the jobs that they want to do. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln, who as a former nurse powerfully made the point about the effect that the lack of the bursary has on the situation. Cancer Research UK has also pointed to the chronic shortages in the diagnostic workforce, with over one in 10 positions unfilled nationally. This is a worrying trend, as more people are expected to be diagnosed with cancer over the years and the NHS cancer workforce are already struggling to keep up with demand.

We covered a lot of this ground with the Minister in the debate earlier this month, in which we also discussed the long-term plan. The Minister said that, “we must ensure that we have the right staff with the appropriate skills and expertise to ensure that patients receive the best care.”—[Official Report, 8 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 60WH.]

I agree with him. Therefore, will he tell the House when he plans to publish the workforce implementation plan and when the budget for Health Education England will be set? Patients have a right to the best possible care and it is crucial that the NHS workforce are able to provide that. That is why I believe the Minister should consider it—as he probably does—a top priority.

It will be World Cancer Day on Monday, and I am proudly wearing my wristband. We must recognise the contribution the UK in particular has made to cancer diagnosis, care and treatment around the world. For example, Cancer Research UK has played a role in developing eight of the world’s top 10 cancer drugs. More than a quarter of the clinical trials that Cancer Research UK funds involve at least one other country. Cancer Research UK’s international grand challenge scheme brings together researchers from the UK, Europe and around the world on three five-year programmes, to take on some of the toughest challenges in cancer research. Cancer is an international challenge, which is why we should all unite together against cancer.

It is not just about surviving cancer. As we have heard today, it is about living well with cancer. According to Macmillan, 70% of people with cancer are living with one or more other serious health conditions, often as a result of cancer and its treatment. Similarly, a third of people who have completed their treatment in the last two years say that their emotional wellbeing is still
affected. As we have heard, during and after treatment, the cost of cancer can be a major issue with regard to not just loss of earnings, but travel and transport costs, and the increasingly expensive parking charges.

I have supported Macmillan’s Cost of Cancer campaign for over 10 years now. It is sad that we still need to debate and discuss this, but it is still a major issue. The issue of parking could be very easily solved. The cost of cancer also includes access to benefits, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak and for Lincoln. That can also be solved easily by some joined-up action across Government. That is why, when thinking about cancer, we must not forget about after-care, advice and support, especially when it comes to further symptoms that could become secondary cancer. In this regard, I believe that it is vital important that GPs are aware of all symptoms of secondary cancer, so that it can be picked up as soon as possible.

Finally, in this World Cancer Day debate, I want to pay tribute to all the NHS cancer workforce for all the hard work they do, day in, day out. Whether diagnosing, treating, caring or advising, they do a difficult but fantastic job, which we are all very grateful for. I also pay tribute to the scientists and researchers who discover the groundbreaking new treatments and information. Finally, I thank the campaigners and volunteers. We cannot beat cancer alone, which is why we must all come together to do so. As always, I look forward to working with the Minister to do just that.

6.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): As ever, time is short, so I cannot answer everyone’s questions, but that is the nature of Westminster Hall. It is nice to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher.

It is an honour, as always, as the Cancer Minister, to respond to these debates. As the shadow Minister said, we have been here before many times. The three Front Benchers are consistent and other hon. Members move around us. This time I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing the debate and on lighting up Parliament pink next Monday. It will be my wife’s birthday, so she will enjoy that. I look forward to seeing my hon. Friend for the event on the Terrace.

The title of the debate, World Cancer Day, suggests two things to me—the fact that cancer is recognised as important enough to have its own world day, and the fact that it transcends every international border and, tragically, affects everybody, regardless of their standing, their age and the wealth they accumulate. It touches everybody, including those of us here in the Chamber. I offer my condolences to the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) and his family. I hope that tomorrow goes well, and I am sure they will honour his late brother-in-law. I wish the hon. Gentleman well.

The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) always speaks with great passion in cancer debates. She is another one of the consistencies in such debates—it is always nice to see her. She talked about the screening review. She was not here on Monday, when we had a very big debate on cervical cancer. There was a Petitions Committee debate initiated by a young lady who died of cervical cancer at the age of 31, leaving four very young children. It was a heartbreaking story, and all her friends were in the Gallery. There was obviously a lot of talk about cervical cancer and the screening age for it. As I said in that debate, Sir Mike Richards is doing a big piece of work for the Department on screening programmes, including for cervical and breast cancer. I am optimistic about what the review will bring, and I know the hon. Lady will take great interest in that report.

The hon. Lady mentioned the national cancer patient experience survey. As she knows, I agree that it is very important, because we need to know what patients are saying. She will therefore be pleased that I decided to give that a permanent opt-out from the new Data Guardian rules, to ensure that that can continue and that the data can be good. She also mentioned technology and Skype interactions, and I know that she will be pleased that technology is one of the three priorities of the new Secretary of State, and that it is at the centre of the long-term plan. She is right to say that words should be followed by action—indeed, that is why the 10-year plan for the NHS has been produced and there will be £20.5 billion a year of extra investment for the NHS in England.

As always, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) spoke from great experience and raised many good points, which I shall not repeat. She is right to say that smoking is still the biggest preventable killer in our United Kingdom. We must and will do better, and we have a very ambitious tobacco control plan in England. We had an interesting ten-minute rule Bill in the House yesterday on smoking in NHS properties in England, which provoked an interesting debate. The Bill was promoted by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin).

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire asked about bowel cancer and screening at 50. I cannot give a final commitment on timescales for lowering the age to 50, but the NHS long-term plan makes it clear that we are committed to doing so as soon as practically possible, which is the key phrase—it has to be practically possible. NHS England and Public Health England, for which I am responsible, are working hard on that. They know I am on their case about it, and I hope to be able to confirm a start date very shortly. I am following it incredibly closely and will say more as soon as I can—I know that she will be watching like a hawk.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) and my shadow, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), talked about the workforce. As I have said many times, the NHS is nothing without the 1.3 million staff who patients depend on day in, day out. With the right workforce in place, we can deliver the long-term plan. In December 2017, Health Education England published the first ever cancer workforce plan, in which we set out our ambitious plans to expand the capacity and skills of the NHS cancer workforce. That was a welcome first step, and the Secretary of State has now commissioned Baroness Dido Harding—she is working closely with Sir David Behun, formerly of the Care Quality Commission—to lead a number of programmes to engage with the key NHS interests and develop a detailed workforce implementation plan. In March they will present initial recommendations to the Department and Secretary of
State, who will then consider the detailed proposals to grow the workforce rapidly as we move towards the big spending review.

The sponsor of the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, raised many great points. He asked about the health boards that they have north of the border, and about those boards’ collaboration with the 19 cancer alliances that we have in England. My cancer alliance is down in Wessex—I should not think that they have an awful lot of interaction. He raises a good point, and I am always up for more collaboration—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) often raises that subject with me, certainly in the absence of an Executive at Stormont. He knows that the offer is always there. In answer to my hon. Friend’s question on health boards, to be honest, there is not much interaction between them and the cancer alliances at that level, but I would say there is significant collaboration at the clinical level, particularly on research. The original bowel cancer screening trial was based at sites in England and Scotland. Indeed, the chair of the UK National Screening Committee, Professor Bob Steele, is based at the University of Dundee. There was therefore a lot of clinical interaction, but maybe not enough practical interaction. I am happy to explore ways to make that happen.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned research, and I think that our record is clear: we are, and want to remain, a world leader in cancer research. That is made clear in the long-term plan. The National Institute for Health Research spent £137 million on cancer research in 2016-17, and the largest research investment in a disease area was in cancer.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen), who is no longer in his place, made the point about the late Baroness Jowell and her work on brain tumours. Her great legacy there is to stimulate the research community to come forward with decent research proposals that we can back. We heard the same in last week’s debate on the treatment of ME: it is not for Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care to decide what research projects will and will not happen. The projects have to come from the research community; and they have to be good to be backed by the NIHR. That is the same for cancer as it is for every area.

How much of the extra NHS funding will be used to tackle cancer? The funding breakdown for the long-term plan is still being finalised, but the plan has significant ambition for England around the 75% stage 1 to early diagnosis standard. I am very proud of that. We have already put £600 million into the 19 cancer alliances in England, and there will be more. They are very much our delivery mechanism and, as I said, I would be very keen to see any interaction between those two across the border—especially on behalf of those who represent seats close to the border.

Many other points were made—those around PIP and DLA were well made—and I know that CLIC met the Minister for Disabled People, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton). She, too, will take notice of all the points made in the debate.

I wish to give my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk 60 seconds to sum up, so I will conclude. We have made great strides in cancer in the past 20 years, and we have the best survival rate ever. On research, diagnostics, treatment and, ultimately, survival rates, however, there is so much more to do. Anyone who knows me or listens to me when I respond to such debates knows that I certainly do not lack ambition in this area, nor is there an ounce of complacency in me.

6.12 pm

John Lamont: I am grateful to all Members who contributed to the debate. I am struck, as ever, by how many of us have had friends, families or people in our community—as well as people through casework—affected so personally by this terrible illness. I am also grateful for the Minister’s comments. I make a final plug for 4 February, the coming Monday, which is World Cancer Day. If people are able to join the team from Cancer Research and others on the Terrace at about 5.30 pm on Monday, they will see the Palace of Westminster lit in pink to mark that important day.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered World Cancer Day.

6.13 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Monday 21 January 2019

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): On 10 January 2019, News UK submitted an application to DCMS requesting that the Secretary of State accept proposed undertakings in place of undertakings that were put in place by the then Secretary of State for Trade (the right hon. John Biffin) in 1981.

The proposed new undertakings seek to vary the sections of the 1981 conditions which require that ultimate control over the resources, including journalists, available to each newspaper are kept separately with the editor of each newspaper. The main variation proposed by News UK is to set out explicitly in paragraph 5 of the proposed undertakings that:

“The newspapers may share services and resources, including journalists, to such extent as the editors agree.”

News UK has submitted that the changes would permit a greater sharing of resources and services, including journalists, between The Times and The Sunday Times and that such sharing is a necessary step to mitigate the financial challenges that the two titles will face in the future.

I am placing in the Library of the House today a copy of the application we received from News UK along with details on how to comment on the application. The deadline for comments is 5pm on Monday 11 February. This application will be considered in a quasi-judicial manner through a fair and transparent process.

If, after considering the responses, my decision is to accept the new undertakings, there will be a further consultation on the terms of the new undertakings as required by the legislation.

The proposed undertakings are also available online at: http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements.

EXTING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Voting Rights

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Today, I can confirm that the Government have reached a reciprocal agreement with Spain that will secure the rights of UK nationals in Spain, and Spanish citizens in the UK, to stand and vote in local elections now and in the future. This is a positive step forward in our future relationship with Spain and we hope this will be the first of many similar bilateral agreements with other member states.

This agreement with Spain is the first of its kind and secures the democratic rights of over 300,000 UK nationals who are now able to continue exercising their right to vote and stand in local Spanish elections, including the upcoming election in May 2019.

Citizens have always been our priority in the negotiations for our departure from the EU, and in particular to protect the rights of British expats. The UK advocated the inclusion in the withdrawal agreement of the right to vote and stand in local elections for UK nationals living in the EU, and EU citizens in the UK, but the EU did not want to include these rights within the scope of the agreement. Instead, we have been clear that we will pursue these rights on a bilateral basis and that the right of EU citizens to vote in local elections in the UK should be considered alongside the rights of UK nationals. It has always been our priority to secure these reciprocally.

To provide certainty while we pursue these agreements, we do not anticipate any changes to the current primary legislative framework for candidacy and voting rights being made before the May 2019 English and Northern Ireland local elections. These are devolved competences and the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly are responsible for their own franchises in local and devolved assembly elections. It is the policy intent of the UK Government that candidates who are validly nominated and elected at the May 2019 local elections in England and Northern Ireland should be able to serve that term of office in full.

I will be depositing the agreement in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1257]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Domestic Abuse

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): My right hon. Friends, the Prime Minister and Justice Secretary and I are today publishing the consultation response on transforming the response to domestic abuse and draft Domestic Abuse Bill following the public consultation last year.

Domestic abuse destroys lives. It is a cruel and complex crime that can affect anyone, leaving physical and emotional scars that can last a lifetime. It also places a considerable demand on public services—Home Office research published today estimates the economic and social costs of domestic abuse to society to be £66 billion each year. This consultation response and draft Bill further our ambition to transform the response to domestic abuse and change social attitudes that keep these crimes hidden in plain sight.

On 8 March 2018, the then Home Secretary issued a written ministerial statement (HCWS325) announcing a comprehensive public consultation to address domestic abuse from prevention through to rehabilitation. The consultation ran for 12 weeks and received around 3,200 responses. In addition to questionnaires, we ran a series of national roadshows and themed roundtables with victims and other stakeholders. The Government are grateful to the victims, frontline practitioners and
others who took the time to respond to the consultation and supported the events. These responses have helped us to refine and improve our proposals.

To reflect the prevalence and complexity of domestic abuse and the harm it causes, the consultation response is truly a cross-Government effort. It recognises that change needs to occur across all statutory agencies, including in courts, police, schools, social care, housing, welfare and healthcare settings.

For those measures which require legislation to implement, the Government have today published the Domestic Abuse Bill in draft for pre-legislative scrutiny. A joint committee of both Houses will be established as soon as parliamentary time allows. Once the joint committee has reported, the Government are committed to introducing the Domestic Abuse Bill as soon as practicable to undertake such scrutiny. Once the joint committee has reported, the Government are committed to introducing the Domestic Abuse Bill as soon as parliamentary time allows.

The draft Bill includes the following measures:

- Introduce the first ever statutory Government definition of domestic abuse (which will include economic abuse);
- Establish the office of Domestic Abuse Commissioner and set out the Commissioner’s functions and powers (the competition for the appointment of the Designate Domestic Abuse Commissioner was launched on 4 December 2018);
- Provide for a new Domestic Abuse Protection Notice and Domestic Abuse Protection Order;
- Prohibit perpetrators of abuse from cross-examining their victims in person in the family courts and give the court discretion to prevent cross-examination in person where it would diminish the quality of the witness’ evidence or cause the witness significant distress;
- Create a statutory presumption that complainants of an offence involving behaviour which amounts to domestic abuse are eligible for special measures in the criminal courts;
- Enable domestic abuse offenders to be subject to polygraph testing as a condition of their licence following their release from custody;
- Place the guidance supporting the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme on a statutory footing;
- Ensure that where a local authority, for reasons connected with domestic abuse, grants a new secure tenancy to a social tenant who had or has a secure lifetime or assured tenancy (other than an assured shorthold tenancy) this must be a secure lifetime tenancy; and
- Support ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the “Istanbul Convention”), by extending the extraterritorial jurisdiction of the criminal courts in England and Wales to further violent and sexual offences.

Ahead of the legislation we have already started to implement measures to improve support for victims and their children. We have launched applications for the designation Domestic Abuse Commissioner role; we have announced successful bids to the children affected by domestic abuse and we have launched applications for the Domestic Abuse Commissioner. The Government are determining what needs to occur across all statutory agencies, including in courts, police, schools, social care, housing, welfare and healthcare settings.

The Government remain resolute in their determination to fundamentally change the response to this insidious crime through delivering the cross-Government commitments set out in today’s Command Paper. It demonstrates a clear focus on prevention and sets out new measures to: raise awareness; better support victims and their children; ensure perpetrators are pursued and prosecuted; and drive consistently high performance in the response to domestic abuse across all local areas, agencies and sectors.

A copy of the Command Paper (CP 15), including the consultation response, the draft Domestic Abuse Bill and explanatory notes, will today be laid before the House and will be available online at www.gov.uk. Copies of the Paper on the economic and social costs of domestic abuse; draft Domestic Abuse Bill impact assessment; delegated powers memorandum; and ECHR memorandum will be placed in the House Library.

[HCWS1255]

PRIME MINISTER

European Union (Withdrawal) Act: Section 13(4) Statement

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This statement is being made for the purposes of Section 13(4) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and outlines how the Government intend to proceed in the light of the House’s decision on Tuesday 15 January 2019 not to agree to a resolution laid for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

The Government will today table the motions required in both Houses under section 13(6) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Later this week the Government will also take the steps set out in section 13(11) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. This will require motions pursuant to section 13(11) (b) to be tabled in both Houses.

It is the Government’s intention, in accordance with the procedure allowed under section 13(13)(b) and (c), for those later section 13(11)(b) motions to be combined with the motion tabled today under section 13(6). The scheduled debates in the House of Lords and the House of Commons, on 28 and 29 January respectively, will therefore be on motions relating to the statements made under both s. 13(4) and s. 13(11)(a).

The joint motion will be in neutral terms, in line with the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, but will now be amendable following the House of Commons decision on 4 December 2018 that, “the provisions of Standing Order No. 24B (Amendments to motions to consider specified matters) shall not apply in respect of any motion tabled by a Minister of the Crown pursuant to any provision of section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. The joint motion in the House of Commons will be as follows:

The Prime Minister

That this House, in accordance with the provisions of sections 13(6)(a) and 13(11)(b)(i) and 13(13)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, has considered the written statement titled “Statement under Section 13(4) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018” and made on 21 January 2019, and the written statement titled “Statement under Section 13(11)(a) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018” and made on (date on or before 24 January).

An equivalent motion will be tabled in the House of Lords.

Members will be advised that amendments tabled to the original section 13(6) motion will need to be re-tabled when the second joint motion is tabled.
We are following this course of action to avoid any legal uncertainty as to whether the Government have complied fully with the terms of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Section 13(11) of the Act states that the Government must make the statement and motion mentioned above if, at the end of 21 January 2019, “there is no agreement in principle in negotiations under Article 50(2)”. While the negotiations have yielded an agreement, that agreement has not been approved by Parliament.

Notwithstanding this action, making this statement does not prejudice any further actions the Government may choose to take under section 13(1) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 at a later date.

Earlier today I updated the House on the next steps following the decision not to approve the deal negotiated with the European Union and following initial engagement with senior parliamentarians across the House.

[HCWS1258]
Written Statements

Tuesday 22 January 2019

ECOFIN: 22 January 2019

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 22 January 2019. The Council will discuss the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 21 January meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Following this, the Romanian presidency will hold a discussion on the priorities for the next EU institutional cycle.

InvestEU

The Council will hold a policy debate on the InvestEU programme.

European system of financial supervision review

The Council will hold a policy debate on the review of the European system of financial supervision.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Romanian presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Presidency work programme

The Romanian presidency will present its work programme for January to June 2019, followed by an exchange of views.

European semester 2019

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the 2019 annual growth survey and the Council conclusions on the 2019 alert mechanism report. The Council will also be asked to approve a Council recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area.

Economic and monetary union

The presidency will provide an update following the euro summit in December 2018.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Surveillance Camera Commissioner: Annual Report

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying a copy of the 2017-18 annual report of the Surveillance Camera Commissioner before the House, as required by section 35 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

The Surveillance Camera Commissioner is an independent role appointed under section 34 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

The annual report covers the exercise of the Surveillance Camera Commissioner’s statutory functions over the year to 31 March 2018 and provides a comprehensive update on the progress made against the “National Surveillance Camera Strategy for England and Wales”, which the commissioner published in March 2017.

TRANSPORT

Darford-Thurrock River Crossing Charging Scheme

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Dartford-Thurrock crossing charging scheme account for 2017-18 is published today under regulation 3(1)(d) of the Trunk Road Charging Schemes (Bridges and Tunnels) (Keeping of Accounts) (England) Regulations 2003. A copy of the accounts will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Contingent Liability Notification


Confidence in the long-term stability of the pension system is a prerequisite for effective participation and achieving secure incomes in retirement, which are at the core of Government policy in this area. For this reason, there is a distinct body of legislation about private pensions and a number of public bodies play important roles, including the NEST.

NEST was established by Government to support the policy of all employers being obliged to automatically enrol their eligible staff into a workplace pension scheme. NEST ensures that all employers have access to a low cost, high quality pension scheme.

The Pension Schemes Act 2017 introduced the definition of a “master trust” and the introduction of a robust new authorisation and supervision regime to ensure that master trusts being used for automatic enrolment are safe for the nearly 10 million people now saving in these schemes.

To be able to operate in the pensions market as a master trust, schemes, of which NEST is one, are required to meet five authorisation criteria prescribed in the Pension Schemes Act 2017.

One of the criteria is that the scheme must be financially sustainable and that in the event of a triggering event, an event that would put the scheme at risk of needing to wind up, the scheme must hold sufficient financial reserves to cover its gradual closure without putting these additional costs on to the scheme members.

As NEST is currently funded through a Government loan and, therefore, holds no financial reserves, the Pensions Regulator, which oversees the authorisation process, has suggested a “letter of comfort” from Government could provide a solution, which for Government accounting purposes is described as a contingent liability.

The letter confirms that, in the remote possibility of a triggering event occurring, Government would fund NEST through to closure and meet any one-off associated
closure costs. This gives a remote contingent liability of £329 million. The expected loss as calculated by the Department is £16.45 million (based on the liability multiplied by risk).

DWP as sponsoring Department will manage the governance and risk associated with the contingent liability.

[HCWS1260]
Written Statements

Wednesday 23 January 2019

TREASURY

Counter-terrorist Asset Freezing Regime

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):
Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (TAF A 2010), the Treasury is required to prepare a quarterly report regarding its exercise of the powers conferred on it by part 1 of TAF A 2010. This written statement satisfies that requirement for the period 1 July to 30 September 2018.

This report also covers the UK’s implementation of the UN’s ISIL (Daesh) and Al-Qaida asset freezing regime (ISIL-AQ), and the operation of the EU’s asset freezing regime under EU regulation (EC) 2580/2001 concerning external terrorist threats to the EU (also referred to as the CP 931 regime).

Under the UN’s ISIL-AQ asset freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury, through the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the ISIL (Daesh) and Al-Qaida (Asset-Freezing) Regulations 2011.

Under EU regulation 2580/2001, the EU has responsibility for designations and OFSI has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under part 1 of TAF A 2010.

A new EU asset freezing regime under EU regulation (2016/1686) was implemented on 22 September 2016. This permits the EU to make autonomous Al-Qaida and ISIL (Daesh) listings.

The tables available as an online attachment set out the key asset-freezing activity in the UK during the quarter.

The recently passed Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act will help ensure that UK counter-terrorist sanctions powers remain a useful tool for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to consider utilising, while also meeting the UK’s international obligations.

Under the Act, a designation could be made where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that the person or group is or has been involved in a defined terrorist activity and that designation is appropriate. This approach is in line with the UK’s current approach under UN and EU sanctions and would be balanced by procedural protections such as the ability of designated persons to challenge the Government in court.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-01-23/HCWS1267/.

[HCWS1267]

Double Taxation Convention
(United Kingdom and Israel)

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):
A protocol to the double taxation convention with Israel was signed on 17 January 2019. The text of the protocol is available on HM Revenue and Customs’ pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS1266]

DEFENCE

RAF Aerobatic Team: North American Tour

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):
On 21 October 2018, the Secretary of State for Defence announced that the Royal Air Force aerobatic team (the Red Arrows) will fly the flag for Britain, both in the skies and on the ground during a tour of North America in summer 2019. This tour will be called Western Hawk 19.

As well as displaying at a range of shows across North America the Red Arrows will also attend engagements promoting the Government’s GREAT campaign, visit local schools, meet with business leaders and showcase the very best of British culture. Western Hawk 19 will showcase our excellence, professionalism and proud heritage in education, engineering and technology to our allies. It will also demonstrate the global reach and capability of the RAF and our continuing support of the United Kingdom’s defence and commerce industries.

The tour of North America will also be an opportunity to celebrate and strengthen our incredible relationship with the US and Canada.

I can now announce the planned tour dates. The Red Arrows will fly at the royal international air tattoo from 19 July to 21 July 2019. After a short period of maintenance and leave for Red Arrows personnel, they will depart the UK at the end of July and will tour North America until after the end of the UK display season. While the Red Arrows will not be displaying in the UK for the latter part of the 2019 UK display season, the RAF’s other display assets including Typhoon, the Battle of Britain memorial flight and the Falcons parachute team will continue to keep the RAF in the public eye during this period. Their air display participation will be carefully prioritised to deliver maximum impact. Local communities will have the opportunity to bid for participation of the Red Arrows in their area in the 2020 display season in the normal manner.

[HCWS1264]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Cyprus: Civil Litigation

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):
I would like to update Parliament on a legal settlement that the UK Government have reached concerning civil law claims arising from the emergency period in Cyprus from 1955-59 (“the emergency”).

[HCWS1267]
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Social Care

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Today I would like to update the House on social care funding following the Opposition day debate of 17 October 2018.

Modern society is in the fortunate position where people are living longer and life expectancy for those living with complex health conditions, including disabilities, has dramatically increased. However, with 1.5 million more people aged over 75 expected in the next 10 years, we recognise the pressures this places on the health and social care system and the Government are taking steps to support the sector in responding to these challenges.

In the short term, the Government have given Councils access to up to £3.6 billion more dedicated funding for adult social care in 2018-19 and up to £3.9 billion for 2019-20. This injection of funding is the biggest that councils have ever received and is helping the NHS and social care to support people to live for longer and more independently.

Despite the fact that the NHS is busier than ever before, the majority of patients are discharged quickly. We know that adult social care capacity can become increasingly pressurised over the winter months and this can have a knock-on effect on NHS hospitals. This funding is helping to reduce delays, get patients home quicker and free up hospital beds across England for more urgent and acute cases. This is having a tangible effect with delayed transfers of care accounted for 4,580 occupied beds per day in November 2018—a decrease of 2,081 per day against the February 2017 baseline.

The autumn Budget also announced an additional £650 million of new money for social care in 2019-20. This includes another £240 million for adult social care to alleviate winter pressures on the NHS next year and a further £410 million to improve social care for older people, people with disabilities and children. Councils will also benefit from an additional £35 million increase in the disabled facilities grant in 2018-19. This additional capital funding will provide home aids and adaptations for disabled children and adults on low incomes to help them continue to live independent lives in their own homes.

References to £1.3 billion of cuts are entirely misleading as the figure refers only to the revenue support grant which should not be considered in isolation when councils have access to council tax, business rates and other local income to deliver their local services. In fact, funding for local government will increase in real terms in 2019-20. This means more money for councils to deliver for their local communities.

This Government’s actions mean that funding available for adult social care is set to increase by 9% in real terms from 2015-16 to 2019-20 and the additional funding is allowing councils to support more people and sustain a diverse care market.

All councils have statutory duties to look after the vulnerable, elderly and disabled people in their area. The Care Act established a national threshold that defines the care needs that local authorities must meet which eliminates the postcode lottery of eligibility across England. In addition to providing social care services, last year local authorities in England advised over 500,000 people on how to access other services to meet their care needs. This includes services provided by leisure, housing, transport and care providers as well as voluntary groups.

In the longer term, the NHS’s Long-Term Plan is committed to supporting people to age well. As part of this the Government will increase investment in primary medical and community health services by at least £4.5 billion by 2023-24. This will support people to get joined-up, integrated care closer to home and will increase the capacity and responsiveness of community and intermediate care services to those who will benefit the most. Furthermore, the plan recognises the importance of integration between health and social care and commits to upgrading NHS support to all care home residents.
who would benefit by 2023-24 through the enhanced health in care homes programme, which embeds healthcare professionals into care homes.

The Government have committed to publishing the Green Paper at the earliest opportunity which will consider the fundamental issues facing the adult social care system and present proposals for reform while the social care funding for future years will be settled in the spending review where the overall approach to funding local government will also be considered.

[HCWS1268]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Tenant Fees Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Today I have placed in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order 83O in respect of any motion relating to a Lords amendment, for Commons consideration of Lords amendments stage for the Tenant Fees Bill.

[HCWS1265]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme Levy

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): The Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme (Levy) Regulations 2014 require active employers’ liability insurers to pay an annual levy, based on their relative market share, for the purpose of meeting the costs of the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme (DMPS). This is in line with the insurance industry’s commitment to fund a scheme of last resort for sufferers of diffuse mesothelioma who have been unable to trace their employer or their employer’s insurer.

Today I can announce that the total amount of the levy to be charged for 2018-19, the fifth year of the DMPS, is £39.8 million. The amount will be payable by active insurers by the end of March 2019.

Individual active insurers will be notified in writing of their share of the levy, together with how the amount was calculated and the payment arrangements. Insurers should be aware that it is a legal requirement to pay the levy within the set timescales.

I am pleased that the DMPS has seen four successful years of operation, assisting many hundreds of sufferers of diffuse mesothelioma. The fourth annual report for the scheme was published on 29 November 2018 and is available on the gov.uk website. I hope that members of both Houses will welcome this announcement and give the DMPS their continued support.

[HCWS1263]
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Supporting New Parents in Work

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Through the industrial strategy the Government are working to transform our economy to ensure that everyone, no matter what their background, can enter into the labour market and progress at work.

In the “Good Work Plan” we set out an ambition that all work should be fair and decent. Pregnancy and maternity discrimination has absolutely no place in that ambition. It is unlawful.

In our response to the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into pregnancy and maternity discrimination, we made a commitment to review the position in relation to redundancy following the suggestion that we could further strengthen existing protections. We have completed that review.

Tomorrow, we are publishing a consultation document proposing legislative changes to strengthen the existing protection against redundancy by extending it into a period of return to work after maternity leave or other types of parental leave. It currently applies to women on maternity leave. By doing so we will further help to tackle discrimination and support new parents in work.

The consultation also covers other steps we are taking to change the culture which can exist around pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace.

Copies of the consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

DEFENCE

War Pensions Scheme: Uprising

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The new rates of war pensions and allowances proposed from April 2019 are set out in the following tables. The annual uprating of war pensions and allowances for 2019 will take place from the week beginning 8 April 2019. Rates for 2019 are increasing by 2.4% in line with the September 2018 consumer price index.
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council: January 2019

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council takes place in Brussels on 28 January.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for agriculture will be on the post-2020 common agriculture policy (CAP) reform package. There will be an exchange of views on the new delivery model for the regulation on CAP strategic plans, followed by a presentation from the Commission on green architecture. The Council will then discuss the proposed regulation on common market organisation (CMO) of agricultural products.

The presidency will also give a presentation on its work programme, and there will be a presentation by the Commission on a protein plan, which the Council will then debate.

There is currently one item scheduled for discussion under “any other business”:

- information from the Danish delegation on the establishment of an international centre for antimicrobial resistance solutions (ICARS) to strengthen the fight against AMR internationally and especially in low and middle-income countries.

An additional item is also expected to be added to the agenda under “any other business”:

- information from the Commission on the outcome of the ministerial conference on “Eradication of African swine fever in the EU and the long-term management of wild boar populations”.

HOME DEPARTMENT

National Crime Agency

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The National Crime Agency (NCA) leads the fight against serious and organised crime. It has the power to task other law enforcement partners and a capability, with local to international reach, to disrupt the impact of serious and organised crime on the UK.

This is the fifth HMIC inspection of the NCA. The inspection stemmed from a recommendation in the 2015 NCA internal review of warrants and was conducted jointly with HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HM CPSI).

This report is being published today and I will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Library of both Houses. I have asked Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services to publish this report on my behalf and it will be available online at www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk.

The inspection found that the NCA has been working to tackle the areas of concern highlighted in the 2015 review. The inspection of search authorities, search warrants and production orders identified some deficiencies, but overall HMICFRS found the applications are completed to a good standard. HMICFRS made six recommendations which will improve procedures and update guidance and they believe these recommendations will help enhance what is already a mature process.

It is for the director general to respond to these recommendations, in line with the requirements of the Crime and Courts Act 2013.

Police Grant Report: England and Wales 2019-20

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The Secretary of State for the Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), has today laid before the House, the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2019-20 (HC 1896) for the approval of the House. The report sets out my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary’s determination for 2019-20 of the aggregate amount of grant that he proposes to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996.

The first role of Government is to protect the public. We will always ensure that the police have the powers and resources needed to keep our citizens and communities safe. We know that the police need the right capabilities and resources to respond to the changing nature of crime. This financial year, we provided forces with a £460 million increase in overall funding, including increased funding to tackle counter-terrorism and £280 million for local policing through the police precept. Most Police and Crime Commissioners set out plans to use this funding to either protect or enhance frontline policing.

Last year, we indicated we would provide a similar funding settlement in 2019-20, if the police made progress in delivering further commercial savings, used mobile digital working and increased financial reserves transparency. The police have delivered on these conditions and are on track to deliver £120 million in commercial and back office savings by 2020-21 and move towards a new commercial operating model. All forces have published reserves strategies using the guidance we published in January 2018.

Before announcing the Government’s proposals, we reviewed the demand on the police again. It is clear that demand pressures on the police have risen this year as a result of changing crime. There has been a major increase in the reporting of high harm, previously hidden crimes such as child sexual exploitation and modern slavery and a growing threat from serious and organised crime (SOC). SOC affects more UK citizens, more often, than any other national security threat and costs the economy at least £37 billion each year. It is increasing in both volume and complexity.

Through the serious violence strategy, we are bearing down on the worst spike in serious violence and knife crime that we have seen in a decade by combining support for more robust and targeted policing with effective long-term investment in prevention and earlier intervention. And we need to recognise the work done by the police to combat the evolving threat from terrorism. The Government are determined to support the police to meet the demand across counter-terrorism, serious and organised crime and local policing.

I have carefully considered the responses to the consultation on the provisional police grant report. I am pleased with the positive response we have received with most Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) consulting their communities on using the new £24 precept flexibility in full and many saying that they will use the additional funding to increase or protect the frontline.
I can confirm that the allocations that have been laid before the House today are the same as those proposed in my statement of 13 December 2018. These proposals will help forces to both meet additional demand and manage financial pressures. In total, we will enable an increase in funding for the police system of up to £970 million compared to 2018-19, the biggest increase since 2010. This includes increases in Government grant funding, full use of precept flexibility, funding to support pensions costs, and increased national funding to meet the threats from counter-terrorism and serious and organised crime.

As the Chancellor announced at the Budget, funding for counter-terrorism policing will increase by £160 million compared to the 2015 spending review settlement. This is a year on year increase in counter-terrorism police funding of £59 million (8%) compared to 2018-19. This increases the counter-terrorism budget to £816 million, including £24 million for an uplift in armed policing from the police transformation fund. This is a significant additional investment in the vital work of counter-terrorism police officers across the country. PCCs will be notified of force allocations separately. These will not be made public for security reasons.

The Government have prioritised serious and organised crime (SOC) within our funding for national priorities in 2019-20. Criminal networks are increasingly resilient and adaptable, exploiting technology and ruthlessly targeting the most vulnerable, ruining lives and blighting communities. The new SOC strategy, published on 1 November, sets out the Government’s new approach to prevent serious and organised crime, build our defences against it, track down the perpetrators and bring them to justice. Police forces, alongside the NCA and regional organised crime units, are an essential part of this approach, tackling complex SOC threats, including fraud, cyber- crime and child sexual exploitation and abuse. We will invest £90 million in much-needed SOC capabilities at national, regional and local levels, with a significant proportion allocated directly to police forces.

We are increasing the general Government grants to PCCs by £161 million (including £90 million additional funding from the Exchequer) to a total of £7.8 billion, including a £146 million increase in core grant funding. Each PCC will see their Government grant funding protected in real terms. Specific grants to the Metropolitan Police Service and City of London Police will increase by £14 million; an affordable increase that will better reflect the additional costs of policing London, at a time when the Metropolitan Police Service faces specific financial pressures, and the City of London Police does not benefit from additional council tax precept flexibility.

Following the announcement at the Budget that the Government would allocate funding from the reserve to pay part of the costs of increases in public sector pensions contributions in 2019-20, we are allocating a further £153 million of specific grant funding to support the policing system with increases in pensions contributions (including additional funding for the counter-terrorism police network and the National Crime Agency). This funding will be distributed according to a methodology developed with police leaders.

We are also proposing to double the precept flexibility for locally accountable PCCs. Last year, we provided an additional £12 precept flexibility. This year, we propose giving PCCs the freedom to ask for an additional £2 a month in 2019-20, to increase their band D precept by £24 in 2019-20 without the need to call a local referendum.

It is for locally accountable PCCs to take decisions on local precept and explain to their electorate how this additional investment will help deliver a better police service. If all PCCs use their flexibility in full in 2019-20, based on the latest Office for Budget Responsibility tax base forecasts, it will mean around an additional £509 million public investment in our police system.

Taken together, this substantial increase in police funding will enable forces to continue recruiting, fill crucial capability gaps such as in detectives, meet their genuine financial pressures, drive through efficiency programmes, and improve their effectiveness by preventing crime and delivering better outcomes for victims of crime.

In addition to these increases in direct funding, we will also support PCCs and forces through continued investment of £175 million in the police transformation fund (PTF) and £495 million to improve police technology, as we did last year. Our priorities in the PTF are to support sector led initiatives that will build important national capabilities delivered to forces through the major national police led programmes, which include a Single Online Home (Policing website) to engage more effectively with the public, and new ways of working through productivity and cyber-security tools supporting collaboration. The Home Office technology programmes will, for example, replace and upgrade end of life critical infrastructure such as the Airwave communication system with the 4G emergency services network. The law enforcement data service will replace the existing police national computer and police national database with an integrated service to provide intelligence to law enforcement and its partners. I set out in an annex to this letter further information regarding police funding in 2019-20, namely tables illustrating how we propose to allocate the police funding settlement between the different funding streams and between Police and Crime Commissioners for 2019-20.

As I set out in my statement of 13 December, this investment will support four key pillars of police effectiveness.

1. Increasing capacity, including investing in Police Now to attract excellent new talent, while introducing technology that saves time—so officers spend longer on the frontline;
2. Crime prevention, including funding for innovative new techniques;
3. Enhancing the support we offer to hard-working frontline police officers and staff, with the new national welfare service;
4. Through ensuring system leaders provide national direction on performance, including through working more smartly, with the digitally enabled modern tools to police effectively.

As set out in December, this settlement sets out four priority areas to drive efficiency, productivity and effectiveness next year to drive improvements in services to the public.

1. On behalf of the taxpayer, the Government will expect to see continued efficiency savings in 2019-20 through collective procurement and shared services. We need to see national approaches to procuring forensics, vehicles and basic equipment such as helmets, developed over the coming year. And we will be setting an expectation that every force contributes substantially to procurement savings; we will work with the police to agree the right force level objectives for 2019-20.

I set out today a fully funded plan for the police system of £11.3 billion in 2019-20.
and 2020-21 in the coming months. All forces should also contribute to the development of a new commercial operating model over 2019-20;

2. We will expect major progress to resolve the challenges in investigative resource identified by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, including recruiting more detectives to tackle the shortfall. We will work with the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs’ Council to support forces to make this change by accelerating their action plan on investigations, making full use of the innovation offered by Police Now;

3. Forces will have to continue improving productivity, including through smarter use of data, and digital capabilities including mobile working, with an ambition to deliver £50 million of productivity gains in 2019-20;

4. Furthermore, we expect forces to maintain a SOC response that spans the identification and management of local threats as well as support for national and regional priorities. This response should be built around the disruption of local SOC threats alongside SOC prevention, safeguarding, partnerships and community engagement.

We will be engaging with police leaders in due course to discuss how these improvements will be delivered.

This settlement is the last before the next spending review, which will set long term police budgets and look at how resources are allocated fairly across police forces. The Home Office is grateful to the police for the good attitude, hard work and bravery of police staff around the country for their exceptional service to the public.

The Government pay tribute to our police forces and community engagement.

I have set out in a separate document the tables illustrating how we propose to allocate the police funding model over 2019-20; and 2020-21 in the coming months. All forces should also contribute to the development of a new commercial operating model over 2019-20;

We have been clear that we want to make the housing market fairer and more transparent for tenants, leaseholders and homeowners. This includes making sure consumers have straightforward routes for getting problems swiftly put right when things go wrong with their homes.

That is why my Department consulted earlier this year on options for strengthening consumer redress in housing, including options for streamlining housing redress services to simplify access for consumers.

The consultation sought views on the existing provision of redress for housing consumers and considered how we could improve services, strengthening access where there may be gaps in existing provision, and how future services could be configured to serve consumers better.

Today I am pleased to publish my response to this consultation. The response sets out proposals for a programme of reform to strengthen redress for housing consumers.

First, I am clear that people should be able to access help in resolving housing complaints without needing to apply to the court system. We will bring forward legislation to require all private rented sector landlords, regardless of whether they employ an agent for full management services, to be a member of a redress scheme, including all residential park home site owners and private providers of purpose-built student accommodation. We will also introduce legislation when parliamentary time allows to require all freeholders of leasehold properties, regardless of whether they employ a managing agent, to be a member of a redress scheme.

Finally, we propose to bring forward legislation to create a similar requirement on all developers of new build homes to belong to a new homes ombudsman and will consult on the detail of that legislation in due course.

Secondly, there is a need to simplify access to existing redress schemes. Responses to the consultation were clear that we need to reduce confusion for customers in the face of a multiplicity of schemes, while maintaining the specialisms needed to handle complaints within specific tenures.

I therefore propose the establishment of a new housing complaints resolution service, a single access portal through which consumers will be able to seek help to resolve complaints and access redress when they have not been able to resolve disputes with their landlord, property agent or developer.

I intend to work closely with ombudsmen and redress schemes to deliver this in partnership. My ambition is for this service to be available for social housing residents, private renters, leaseholders and buyers of new build homes. People must be confident in their options when things go wrong with their homes, and we will commit to raising consumer awareness of how to resolve complaints once the new service is operational.

We will establish a redress reform working group with ombudsmen and redress schemes to help drive the programme of reform, including the establishment of the resolution service. We want to work with this group to undertake a comprehensive audit of existing standards for handling complaints and explore how they could be improved through existing and new voluntary guidance on a sector by sector basis which, where appropriate, will be underpinned through legislation or regulation.
It is my ambition that this will develop into a comprehensive code of practice on complaint handling for the whole housing sector. Through this we can ensure that there are clear expectations for accessibility, transparency, timeliness and sanctions in terms of handling complaints. Work to improve complaints handling in the social housing sector will initially be carried forward separately, given our commitments in the social housing Green Paper to address the specific issues facing social housing residents.

The redress reform working group will also help us to work to understand both how to deal with complex and difficult cases, which may not fit easily within the remit of redress schemes, and how to better enforce decisions. We will keep open the option of tabling further legislation if necessary, to make this as effective as possible.

Finally, in October, we announced proposals to ensure that a new homes ombudsman is established to protect the interests of homebuyers and hold developers to account when things go wrong. We intend to bring forward legislation to require developers of new build homes to belong to a new homes ombudsman and we will consult on the detail of the proposed legislation.

Cumulatively these reforms will help ensure that nobody will be left without somewhere to go when something goes wrong with their housing, and that they will have free, accessible and independent routes to have their case resolved in a timely way.

The policy proposals primarily relate to England. The UK Government will be discussing these issues with devolved Administrations on those matters where proposals have scope outside England.


[HCWS1272]

**PRIME MINISTER**

**European Union Withdrawal Act: Section 13(11)(a) Statement**

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Further to section 13(11)(a) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (the 2018 Act), the Government propose to proceed with the steps outlined in my statement of Monday 21 January 2019 [HCWS1258] made under section 13(4) of the 2018 Act. As set out in that statement the Government will schedule a debate on a joint motion to take place on Monday 28 January 2019 in the House of Lords and Tuesday 29 January 2019 in the House of Commons.

To enable these debates to take place the Government will today table in each House joint motions under sections 13(6) and (11) of the 2018 Act, and as provided for by section 13(13) of the 2018 Act. As was explained in the statement of 21 January, these joint motions will replace the motions tabled in both Houses on Monday 21 January under section 13(6) of the 2018 Act. As referred to in that statement, Members will need to re-table the amendments tabled to the original motion under section 13(6)(a) of the 2018 Act. Members should seek advice from the House authorities on tabling amendments.

This approach is being taken to avoid any legal uncertainty as to whether the Government have complied fully with the terms of the 2018 Act.

[HCWS1271]

**TRANSPORT**

**Maritime Strategy**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am today announcing the publication of “Maritime 2050: Navigating the Future”, the Government’s landmark strategy setting out our vision and ambitions for the future of the British maritime sector.

Our nation depends on the wide range of benefits the maritime sector delivers. It contributes over £14 billion a year to the UK economy and directly supports an estimated 186,000 jobs. Around 95% of British imports and exports are moved by sea. The leisure and marine sectors are vital to our enjoyment of the seas. Our maritime clusters around the UK showcase the diversity of our regional economies, from professional services in London to ship management and educational excellence in Scotland.

We rightly take pride in our maritime past. Maritime 2050 is about looking forward, anticipating the challenges and opportunities ahead and recognising the UK’s strengths so we are well placed to capitalise on them. Maritime 2050 looks at these across seven themes and under each makes short, medium and long-term recommendations: UK competitive advantage; people; environment; technology; infrastructure; trade and security and resilience. It highlights multi-billion pound commercial investment in maritime infrastructure at ports and beyond; our unwavering commitment to safety and security; and our reputation for innovation. We pave the way on regulatory frameworks and technology to facilitate smart shipping and autonomy, and lead the way in clean maritime growth. But no matter how far advances in ships and technology take us, it sets out how the people graduating from our maritime training and academic institutions will reflect the world around us and continue to be sought after across the globe for their skills.

As the global maritime sector adapts to challenges such as climate change, rapid technological advances and security concerns, Maritime 2050 sets a series of strategic ambitions around which Government and the sector will focus their efforts, and core values which we will be guided by.

The partnership between Government and the maritime sector has been vital to the development of this strategy. It began in March 2018 with a call for evidence, seeking to reach all branches of the sector, complemented by workshops around the UK to capture the views from across our maritime clusters, and interviews with leaders.
in industry and academia. Maritime 2050 has also benefited from the advice and scrutiny of an independent panel of 13 internationally respected academics, industry leaders, maritime business services providers and promotional bodies. As a result, Maritime 2050 reflects the depth and breadth of the UK’s rich maritime sector. A copy of Maritime 2050 has been placed in the Library of both Houses and is available on gov.uk, together with the trade and technology route maps setting out in greater detail the steps needed to achieve the UK’s strategic maritime ambitions.

[HCWS1270]
Written Statements

Monday 28 January 2019

EDUCATION

Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Teaching remains a popular career choice for many. We recruited over 2,000 more trainee teachers for the 2018-19 academic year than in 2017-18, continuing the positive trend we saw the previous year. However, the growing number of pupils of secondary age means that we need even more teachers. This is at a time when we are losing more teachers from the profession than we can afford to, and are operating in the most competitive labour market on record.

To address this, the Department for Education has developed a teacher recruitment and retention strategy. Building on extensive quantitative and qualitative evidence, the strategy was developed collaboratively with teachers, headteachers, representative bodies, teachers’ unions, initial teacher training providers and leading experts.

At the core of the strategy is the understanding that there are no great schools without great teachers. No other profession is as important to the fate of the next generation or as uniquely rewarding as teaching. The strategy outlines four key areas where focus, investment and reform can have the biggest impact on improving teacher recruitment and retention.

Priority One: Create the right climate for leaders to establish supportive school cultures

At the heart of this will be reforming the school accountability system. In particular we will radically simplify the system helping to reduce pressure, consulting on making “requires improvement” the sole trigger for an offer of support—replacing floor and coasting standards. The new Ofsted framework will have an active focus on reducing teacher workload, with inspectors considering staff workload as part of the leadership and management judgment. They will also look unfavourably on schools that implement burdensome data practices, and will refuse to look at internal assessment data.

Priority Two: Transform support for early career teachers

We are launching the early career framework, which will underpin a fully-funded, two-year package of structured support for all early career teachers linked to the best available research evidence—alongside funded time off timetable in the second year of teaching and additional support for mentors. We will create a major shift in the incentives for new teachers by introducing phased bursaries, with staggered retention payments to encourage good people to remain in the profession, as well as to join.

Priority Three: Build a career offer that remains attractive to teachers as their careers and lives develop

We will develop specialist qualifications to support clearer non-leadership career pathways for teachers who want to stay and excel in the classroom. We will invest in these new and existing leadership qualifications, and will do so disproportionately in challenging schools. We will support headteachers to transform approaches to flexible working in schools.

Priority Four: Make it easier for great people to become teachers

We will launch a new discover teaching initiative, giving as many people as possible the opportunity to experience the unique opportunities that a career in teaching provides. We will radically simplify the process for becoming a teacher, introducing new digital systems designed to make application much easier and more user-friendly. In particular, we will introduce a new one-stop application service for ITT, which will be easier to use and designed to better meet the needs of potential trainees. We will review the ITT market to support it to work more efficiently and effectively.

This strategy builds on work already in hand to achieve this Government’s vision to improve teacher recruitment and retention. We know that delivering this vision will take time; the issues are complicated and long-standing. But we are committed to continuing to work closely with the teaching profession to deliver this vision.

I will deposit a copy of the strategy in the House Library.

[HCWS1278]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Migration Crossings

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Since November 2018 there has been a significant increase in the number of individuals attempting to cross the English Channel illegally in small boats.

This activity represents a substantial risk to the lives of those attempting the crossing, as well as to the rescue services. Organised criminal networks are exploiting vulnerable individuals to drive profit from what is a highly dangerous activity.

As I set out to the House on 7 January, I declared a major incident on 28 December to send a clear message that we will not tolerate these life-threatening and illegal crossings. I established a Gold Command structure to co-ordinate my Department’s response to this issue.

Good progress has been made to date. The re-deployment of Border Force assets and use of aerial surveillance has substantially improved coverage in the Channel and our extensive work with our French counterparts has improved co-ordination, both on land and at sea. We have built on existing structures, such as the Centre Conjoint d’Information et de Co-ordination (CCIC), which sees Border Force and Police Aux Frontières working alongside law enforcement partners to exchange real-time intelligence on criminality at the border and work together to identify and dismantle criminal gangs involved in people smuggling and wider cross-border crime. The Immigration Minister attended the formal opening of CCIC with Interior Minister Christophe Castaner on 25 January and saw first-hand the efforts that both countries are making to enhance our co-operation around border security.
Through these efforts, we have managed to reduce the number of individuals attempting the crossing from around 250 in December to around 90 so far in January, with roughly half of the January attempts being intercepted by partners in France before they can make it to British waters. But even one crossing is too many and I am determined that we make further efforts to deter both the facilitators and the individuals making these crossings.

To that end, I met with Minister Castaner in London on 24 January to agree a Joint Action Plan. The plan solidifies and builds on our existing border security partnership by setting out over £6 million (€7 million) in investment for new security equipment, as well as increased CCTV coverage of ports, air surveillance and shared intelligence. We have also agreed that migrants encountered in the Channel will be taken to the nearest safe port, in accordance with international maritime law.

In addition, the plan features a mutual commitment to return more migrants to France who have used boats to illegally cross the Channel. The first of these returns took place on 24 January.

We will not allow illegal migration and its facilitators to flourish, and we will continue to work closely with France and other countries to provide a strong deterrent against these dangerous crossings. This includes making it clear that those fearing persecution should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, and my officials are looking to strengthen our inadmissibility guidance for claims made by those who have travelled here through countries that are internationally recognised as being safe.

The Joint Action Plan comes into force immediately and builds on the existing framework of co-operation set out in the Sandhurst Treaty. I am confident that it will strengthen the achievements that we have made to date and I thank our French colleagues for their collaboration in working with the United Kingdom to tackle this critical issue—protecting human life, and our border.

I will place a copy of the Joint Action Plan in the House Library.

[HCWS1280]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Funding: Brexit Preparation

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Local government will play a critical role in making a success of Brexit at the local level. My Department is committed to ensuring councils have the support and the funding they need to prepare for an orderly exit from the EU and do appropriate contingency planning.

Today I am announcing an additional £56.5 million to help councils carry out their preparations.

Councils will receive £20 million this financial year as well as £20 million to spend in the next financial year to fund additional planning and capacity. Across the two years, all district councils will receive £35,000, all county councils will receive £175,000, all unitaries will receive £210,000 and all combined authorities will receive £182,000, and £1.5 million will be allocated in 2018-19 only to local authorities facing immediate impacts from local ports, with details of the allocation and distribution of that funding to be announced shortly.

I am retaining £10 million for allocation during 2019-20 to respond to specific local costs that may only become evident in the months after we exit the EU.

Finally, £5 million will be split between teams in my Department and the local government sector for specific purposes such as strengthening resilience preparations and supporting communities.

This funding will help councils to adapt to changes caused by Brexit, while still protecting vital local services.

This will not be the only resources councils receive to fund Brexit costs. The Government have been clear that Departments will assess and, if appropriate, fund any potential new burdens arising on councils as part of EU exit work they are undertaking.

As for councils’ overall funding, the provisional finance settlement which I announced before Christmas provides extra funding, with the confirmation that core spending power is forecast to increase from £45.1 billion in 2018-19 to £46.4 billion in 2019-20. This amounts to a cash increase of 2.8% and a real-terms increase in resources available to local authorities. I will be returning to this House shortly, following consultation, to announce the final settlement.

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<th>Table showing split of £40m upfront funding by type of authority</th>
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<td>2018-19 (£k)</td>
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<td>Combined Authorities (11 including London (GLA))</td>
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<td>District councils</td>
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<td>County councils</td>
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<td>Unitary authorities*</td>
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<td>*Unitary authorities will receive the sum of the county and district allocations. Metropolitan boroughs and London boroughs are unitary authorities.</td>
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[HCWS1279]
Written Statements

Tuesday 29 January 2019

HOME DEPARTMENT

Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Bill

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis of the application of Standing Order 83L of the Standing Orders of the House in respect of the Government amendments tabled for Commons Report stage of the Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Bill scheduled for 30 January 2018. The analysis should be read alongside annex A to the explanatory notes to the Bill.

[HCWS1281]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Finance


I would like to thank all colleagues in the House, council leaders and officers who contributed to the consultation after the provisional settlement was published on 13 December.

My Ministers and I have engaged extensively with the sector, including offering a teleconference to all local authorities, and holding meetings with representative groups, including the Local Government Association, and with councils and MPs. Representations from around 170 organisations or individuals have been carefully considered before finalising the settlement.

This settlement is the final year of the four-year offer which was accepted by 97% of councils in return for publishing efficiency plans. This settlement comprises a broad package of measures and confirms that core spending power is forecast to increase from £45.1 billion in 2018-19 to £46.4 billion in 2019-20, a cash-increase of 2.8% and a real-terms increase in resources available to local authorities.

Yesterday, I released £56.5 million across 2018-19 and 2019-20 to help councils prepare for EU exit.

Adult and children’s social care

The Government have listened and responded to the pressures local authorities are facing and announced at autumn Budget in October 2018 that we will be providing additional resources across 2018-19 and 2019-20 to support social care. This funding includes £240 million in both 2018-19 and 2019-20 to support adult social care services to reduce pressures on the NHS, and an additional £410 million social care support grant for local authorities to support adult and children’s social care services. Having considered responses to the provisional settlement consultation, I can confirm that this will be distributed according to the existing adult social care relative needs formula.

The additional resources announced at autumn Budget, alongside the adult social care council tax precept and the improved better care fund, mean that councils will have been given access to £10 billion in dedicated funding that can be used for adult social care over the three years from 2017-18 to 2019-20. For 2019-20, local authorities will have access to £4.3 billion in dedicated resources for adult social care, including £1.8 billion in improved better care fund grant.

Business rates growth, and the distribution of funds within the levy account

In addition, every authority in England also stands to benefit from increased growth in business rates income, which has generated a surplus in the business rates levy account in 2018-19. I can confirm that £180 million will be returned to the sector and distributed based on each local authority’s 2013-14 settlement funding assessment.

This highlights the continued success of the business rates retention system, from which local authorities estimate they will gain an additional £2.4 billion in retained business rates growth in 2018-19 on top of settlement core funding.

Business rates retention pilots

As we move towards our aim of devolving additional grants to increase business rates retention to 75% from 2020-21, I will continue to test increased business rates retention with a range of local authorities across a wide geographical spread.

At the provisional settlement I confirmed that 15 new pilots will get under way in 2019-20 in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, East Sussex, Hertfordshire, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Norfolk, North and West Yorkshire, North of Tyne, Northamptonshire, Solent authorities, Somerset, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, West Sussex and Worcestershire. I will also be piloting 75% business rates retention in London and continuing ongoing pilots in five devolution deal areas.

New homes bonus

Local authorities are instrumental in ensuring the building of homes this country needs. As well as providing extra resources for social care, rewarding local authorities for economic growth and testing elements of future reform, I am keen to provide as much continuity and certainty to the sector as possible. As a result, I can confirm that the payments threshold for new homes bonus will be retained at 0.4%. To keep the baseline at 0.4%, I am investing an additional £18 million. The total budget for the bonus this year is therefore £918 million.

The consultation illustrated that the sector wants certainty on the future of the new homes bonus after next year. The Government remain fully committed to incentivising housing growth and will consult widely with local authorities on how best to reward housing delivery effectively after 2019-20.
Rural funding

The 2019-20 settlement confirms that the rural services delivery grant will continue to be £81 million in 2019-20, maintaining the highest ever levels of funding provided in 2018-19. This has been welcomed by rural local authorities from particularly sparse communities. Our review of local authorities’ relative needs and resources will consider the specific challenges faced in all geographic areas, including rural areas, to inform the final distribution formula.

Negative RSG

Having listened to representations since the provisional settlement, this settlement also confirms that the Government will directly eliminate the £152.9 million negative revenue support grant (RSG) that occurs in 2019-20 using foregone business rates.

Negative RSG is a direct consequence of the distribution methodology adopted for the 2016-17 settlement, whereby for less grant dependent authorities the required reduction in core funding exceeded their available RSG.

The Government’s decision will prevent any local authority from being subject to a downward adjustment to their business rates tariffs and top-ups that could act as a disincentive for growth, and I believe this is the most straightforward and most cost-effective means of dealing with this issue.

Council tax referendum principles

Finally, I can confirm that in 2019-20 local authorities, with the exception of police and crime commissioners, will retain the same flexibilities to increase council tax as in 2018-19, with a core council tax referendum principle of up to 3%. I have agreed with the Home Secretary that the referendum limits for police and crime commissioners will be set at £24 to address changing demands on police forces.

I have also decided to provide Northamptonshire County Council with an additional 2% council tax flexibility, to assist with the improvements to council governance and services after their serious issues. Use of the flexibility will ultimately be a matter for the authority’s cabinet and full council.

During the consultation, many local authorities called for referendum limits to be removed. However, I believe the proposed limits allow local authorities to retain the flexibility to raise additional resources locally to address local needs, whilst protecting households from excessive increases in council tax, in line with the Government’s manifesto pledge.

Future of local government finance

A strong theme during the consultation was calls for certainty on the future of local government finance. To meet the challenges of the future, we have published two consultations on future reform of the business rates retention system and on the assessment of local authorities’ relative needs and resources. These consultations close on 21 February.

Alongside the 2016-17 local government finance system, the Government announced a review to develop a more up-to-date and responsive distribution methodology for the sector. In December, I announced a new consultation, seeking views on the future assessment of relative needs and resources, and on principles for transitioning to new funding arrangements in 2020-21.

Alongside the new funding methodology, in 2020-21 we will also be implementing the latest phase of our business rates retention programme that gives local councils the levers and incentives they need to grow their local economies. The consultation seeks views on how the business rates system can be reformed to provide a strong growth incentive; strike a desirable balance between risk and reward; and reduce complexity and disproportionate volatility in local authority income where possible.

Conclusion

This settlement recognises the pressures that councils face in meeting growing demand for services and rewards their impressive efforts to drive efficiencies and help rebuild our economy.

This settlement answers calls for additional funding in 2019-20, and it paves the way for a more self-sufficient and reinvigorated system of local government.

[HCWS1282]

JUSTICE

Convention against Torture: UN Protocol

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The optional protocol to the convention against torture (OPCAT), which the UK ratified in December 2003, requires states parties to establish a “national preventive mechanism” (NPM) to carry out visits to places of detention to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The Government established the independent UK NPM in March 2009, and extended its membership in December 2013, and in January 2017. The UK NPM is currently composed of 21 scrutiny bodies covering the whole of the UK, and prepares annual reports on its activities. It also has an independent website at: www.nationalpreventivemechanism.org.uk.

Following previous practice, I have presented to Parliament the ninth NPM’s annual report (Command Paper CP 17). This report covers the period from 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018. This year we mark 10 years since the establishment of the NPM, and I continue to commend the important work that the NPM has carried out over this period and the NPM’s independent role in safeguarding the human rights of detainees across the UK. I also note the NPM’s observations on prisons, children in detention, police custody, immigration detention, health and social care detentions, and court custody.

[HCWS1283]
Written Statements

Wednesday 30 January 2019

TREASURY

Public Service Pensions

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):
The Government are announcing a pause to one element of the valuations of public service pensions, following a Court ruling on part of the 2015 pension reforms.

The coalition Government introduced reforms to public sector pensions, meaning most public sector workers were moved to new pension schemes in 2015.

In December 2018, the Court of Appeal ruled that the “transitional protection” offered to some members as part of the reforms amounts to unlawful discrimination. The Government are seeking permission to appeal this decision. If this is unsuccessful, the Court will require steps to be taken to compensate employees who were transferred to the new schemes.

A mechanism for assessing the value of pensions (the “cost control mechanism”) was also introduced as part of the 2015 reforms. In September of last year, the Government announced that provisional results indicated that the cost control mechanism would be engaged, triggering automatic changes to member benefits.

However, given the potentially significant but uncertain impact of the Court of Appeal judgment, it is not now possible to assess the value of the current public service pension arrangements with any certainty. The provisional estimate is that the potential impact of the judgment could cost the equivalent of around £4 billion per annum. It is therefore prudent to pause this part of the valuations until there is certainty about the value of pensions to employees from April 2015 onwards.

The value of public service pensions will not be reduced as a result of this suspension. If the Government are defeated, employees will be compensated in a way that satisfies the judgment.

In order to ensure employers are meeting the increased costs of providing pensions, the part of the valuations of the unfunded pension schemes which sets employer contributions (which existed before the 2015 reforms) will continue. Employers in unfunded schemes have been planning for these changes in employer contributions to be implemented in April 2019, and the Treasury is in the process of allocating funding to Departments to help with these costs.

Whatever the Court outcome, we know the costs of providing public sector pensions are increasing. The 2015 reforms were to ensure public service pensions are affordable and sustainable in the long term, maintaining intergenerational fairness and ensuring the burden on the working population remains proportionate.

[HCWS1286]

DEFENCE

Afghanistan: Locally Employed Staff

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster):
I am responsible for overseeing and ensuring the delivery of the ex-gratia redundancy scheme and intimidation policy, in support of former Afghan locally employed staff (LES), on behalf of the interested Government Departments.

All former staff have now selected their redundancy option, provisioned through the ex-gratia scheme. Some 200 former staff chose the finance option, and around 150 former staff are in education having selected our five-year training offer; 18 people began their training in 2018, while the first cohort are due to complete their five-year package by mid-2019. Within the training package, the Government have also provided additional resources to support in their studies scholars with disabilities. The Government are proud to have assisted these men and women in achieving their potential and ensuring they, their families and their country have a brighter future with improved employment prospects.

In June 2018 the Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) announced an amendment to the relocation offer of the ex-gratia scheme, this changed the eligibility date from 19 December 2012 to 1 May 2006. All other criteria remain the same, namely that the former LES must have been directly employed by the UK Government, have worked for 12 months continuously outside the wire on the front line in Helmand province and have been made redundant. Following the announcement, Ministry of Defence (MOD) officials are on target to complete a review of approximately 4,500 personnel files to assess each individual’s eligibility under the amended criteria; this task will be completed by Easter 2019. In addition, officials have received enquiries from over 440 callers regarding the amended criteria; 95% of these callers have been informed of the outcome of their enquiry with officials seeking clarification and further evidence for the remainder.

The scheme has relocated 437 former staff and their families, a total of 1,279 individuals, to the UK, and we expect around 10 families to relocate this year; this does not include those who might now be eligible under the amended eligibility criteria announced in June 2018.

Last year a review was initiated into the ex-gratia compensation payments made to 12 individuals for injuries they sustained while working with UK forces. They had each subsequently decided to relocate to the UK through the ex-gratia scheme and the review sought to uplift their original payment made while residing in Afghanistan to reflect the economic conditions of life in the UK. Thus far the review has resulted in payments totalling £3.35 million to support these brave people, some of whom sustained profoundly life changing injuries. Our hope is this money will improve their quality of life and support them and their families to build their life in the UK.

Our intimidation policy continues to support all former staff who experience intimidation within Afghanistan as a result of their employment with the UK. This policy
The MOD Police to investigate the claims. To date this dedicated team have assisted over 530 staff by providing bespoke security advice and, where applicable, funding relocations to safe areas within Afghanistan. It remains the case that the level of intimidation faced has not so far been such that an individual has had to be relocated to the UK in order to ensure their safety. However, the changing security position in Afghanistan is kept under careful review. The UK remains the only nation to have established an in-country specialist investigation unit to address concerns of intimidation.

I chair the cross-Government locally employed civilian assurance committee, which has continued to scrutinise the application of the intimidation policy to ensure that it is effectively administered and that former Afghan staff who feel threatened owing to their employment by the UK are properly supported. Committee members include peers from the House of Lords (the former Chief of Defence Staff, Lord Stirrup, Baroness Coussins and the Bishop of Colchester), a suitably experienced Police detective, a former local staff member who relocated to the UK through the ex-gratia scheme and cross-Government representatives. The Committee met three times in 2018 and reviewed a total of 18 cases; in each case the Committee members felt the policy has been applied effectively. The Committee has continued to review the security situation in Afghanistan at each meeting, as it relates to the risk of intimidation and the viability of mitigation measures. No issues have so far been raised in this respect. The Committee also considered elements of the guidance that supports the in-country delivery of the intimidation policy and made recommendations to enhance the advice provided. Furthermore, a selection of closed intimidation cases were also independently assured by the Government Legal Service, who have continued to conduct regular reviews of closed intimidation cases to ensure that the decisions are robust; no significant issues were raised.

It is the Government’s belief that our ex-gratia redundancy scheme and intimidation policy remain fit for purpose and properly meet our responsibilities to men and women who played such an important part in our efforts to bring peace and security to Afghanistan.

[NHCWS1284]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018: Section 4 Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): This statement is issued in accordance with section 4 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 (‘the Act’). Section 4 of the Act requires that I, as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, report on a quarterly basis on guidance issued under that section of the Act, and report on how I plan to address the impact of the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers on human rights obligations within three months of the day the Act was passed.

The Act received Royal Assent on 1 November 2018. Following careful consideration of the sensitive issues section 4 deals with, and in consultation with the Northern Ireland civil service, guidance under section 4 was published on 17 December 2018.

The guidance notes that it does not, and cannot be used to, change the current law on abortion or same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland. Both issues remain devolved matters in Northern Ireland. The guidance provides that all relevant Northern Ireland departments should continue to have regard to all of their legal obligations, including the Human Rights Act 1998 and sections 24 and 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, in exercising any relevant functions in relation to abortion and same-sex marriage.

I have consulted the head of the Northern Ireland civil service in the preparation of this report. He has reaffirmed the continuing commitment of the NICS to have regard to their legal obligations when exercising any relevant functions in relation to abortion and same-sex marriage.

I will keep the Government’s position on these sensitive devolved issues under review in light of the UK Government’s legal obligations, and in light of any relevant emerging legal judgments, as appropriate.

I believe, however, that the current absence of devolved Government in Northern Ireland should not dislodge the principle that it is for the devolved Administration to both legislate on, and ensure compliance with, human rights obligations in relation to such devolved matters.

Restoring the Executive remains my top priority and I am continuing to encourage the parties to come together to work towards restoring devolved Government. I am firmly of the view that the people of Northern Ireland need their elected representatives back in Government to take important decisions on the issues that matter most to them.

[HCWS1285]
Written Statements

Thursday 31 January 2019

TREASURY

ECOFIN, 22 January 2019

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 22 January 2019. The UK was represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council discussed the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President briefed the Council on the outcomes of the 21 January meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Following this, the Romanian presidency held a discussion on the priorities for the next EU institutional cycle.

European system of financial supervision review

The Council held a policy debate on the review of the European system of financial supervision.

InvestEU

The Council held a policy debate on the InvestEU programme.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Romanian presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Presidency work programme

The Romanian presidency presented its work programme for January to June 2019.

European semester 2019

The Council adopted Council conclusions on the 2019 annual growth survey and the Council conclusions on the 2019 alert mechanism report. The Council also approved a Council recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area.

Economic and monetary union

The presidency provided an update following the euro summit in December 2018.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council, 21 January 2019

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 21 January. It was chaired by the High Representative and Vice President of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

Current affairs

Ministers briefly discussed the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Venezuela and Syria and noted the recent bomb attack in Bogotá and developments on Yemen.

Disinformation

The Council discussed the action plan against disinformation that was presented by the High Representative and European Commission on 5 December 2018. Ministers expressed their strong support for the plan and exchanged views on its implementation, underlining the need to respond to external security challenges while also respecting national approaches and protecting freedom of expression and of the media.

The Council highlighted the creation of an EU “rapid alert system” to share expertise and best practices, and to promote co-ordinated action, notably through awareness raising campaigns. Ministers stressed the need to engage with civil society, business and academia to tackle disinformation, as well as to work with international partners, such as NATO and the G7 on this issue.

The Council agreed that the EU’s operational capacities should be strengthened, including by reinforcing the three European External Action Service strategic communication taskforces.

EU-League of Arab States (LAS) relations

The EU-LAS ministerial is scheduled to take place in Brussels on 4 February and the first EU-LAS summit on 24 and 25 February in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt. Ahead of these meetings the Council reaffirmed the importance of a strong EU-LAS partnership and the need to co-operate with the LAS in addressing a wide range of issues and common challenges such as multilateralism, trade and investment, the fight against terrorism, migration, and climate change, as well as regional issues.

EU-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) relations

The Council held a short discussion ahead of the 22nd EU-ASEAN ministerial meeting that also took place on 21 January.

The Council agreed a number of measures without discussion:

- The Council adopted conclusions on Nicaragua;
- The Council imposed sanctions against the use and proliferation of chemical weapons;
- The Council added 11 businessmen and five entities to the list of those subject to restrictive measures against the Syrian regime and its supporters;
- The Council adopted a decision in support of the biological and toxin weapons convention (BTWC) in the framework of the EU strategy against proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
- The Council removed two deceased persons from the list of those subject to restrictive measures against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK);
- The Council removed one deceased person from the list of those subject to restrictive measures in respect of actions underlining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine;

[HCWS1292]
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Negotiations for Primary Care Contract for GPs 2019-20

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): I am today updating the House on the outcome of the negotiations on the primary care contract for GPs between the General Practitioners’ Committee of the British Medical Association and NHS England.

For the first time a new five-year contract has been agreed for general practice across England which includes billions of extra investment for improved access to general practice.

The contract for 2019-20 will deliver the most ambitious reform in general practice in a generation and is the first major step forward in delivering the NHS long term plan. It aims to bring 20,000 extra staff into general practice by 2023-24 including pharmacists and social prescribing link workers. This will free up GPs to spend more time with patients who need them most.

It will establish new primary care networks across the country to ensure the NHS is fit for the future for patients, their families and staff. This is part of a record investment in primary medical and community services, which is set to increase by over £4.5 billion by 2023-24, and rise as a share of the overall NHS budget.

The contract will also protect the general practice workforce against rising indemnity costs by introducing a new and centrally-funded clinical negligence scheme for general practice from April 2019. The Department also intends to establish the arrangements for an existing liabilities scheme in April 2019, subject to satisfactory discussions with the medical defence organisations.

Other key elements of the contract include:

- a record £8.9 billion in funding in 2019-20,
- a 4% funding increase each year for the next five years,
- a review of GP access to address unwarranted variation in patients being able to book an appointment with their GPs,
- all patients able to access their records digitally by April 2020 and have the option of web/video consultations by April 2021,
- more joined up services as 111 will be able to directly book GP appointments for callers,
- greater transparency as GPs earning over £150,000 per annum will need to declare their earnings, and
- streamlining of the quality and outcomes framework system with more clinically appropriate indicators to deliver focused improvements in the quality of care.

We understand that NHS England will apply the provision to personal medical services and alternative provider medical services where appropriate.

[HCWS1287]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU JHA Opt-in Decision: Amended Proposal for EU Agency for Asylum

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government have decided not to opt in (under the UK’s JHA opt-in protocol) to the amended proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA).


The United Kingdom remains committed to continued engagement and co-operation with the EU on asylum and migration issues. The UK has provided deployments through EASO to Greece, in support of the EU-Turkey statement, and also to Italy. The UK took the decision not to opt into the initial proposal for an EUAA regulation, published in 2016, to repeal the EASO regulation, based on a number of problematic elements. Most notably, the regulation provides the EUAA with a significant amount of oversight over national asylum systems and, by opting in, the UK could become subject to evaluations and recommendations from the agency, who would have powers to get involved in member states’ asylum systems. We remain of the firm view that the functioning of asylum systems is a sovereign issue.

Until the UK leaves the EU, we remain a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s opt-in to EU legislation on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s commitment to protecting and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

[HCWS1289]

EU JHA Opt-in Decision: Recasting the Returns Directive

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government have decided not to opt in (under the UK’s JHA opt-in protocol) to the proposal to recast the returns directive. The proposal is a recast of the returns directive (2008/115/EC), and sets common standards and procedures to be applied for the return of illegally staying third country nationals to third countries.

The United Kingdom did not opt into the previous version of the directive, adopted in 2008, on the basis that it did not deliver the strong returns regime required by the UK and made the process overly bureaucratic.

We believe this continues to be the case though we recognise that the recast seeks to establish clearer returns procedures and includes a number of additional provisions to those set out in the previous version of the directive.
Since the entry into force of the previous directive, the situation of migration in the EU has changed significantly. Member states face significant difficulties in returning illegally staying third country nationals including inconsistent definitions and varying rates of absconding. It is important that the UK acts in the national interest to maximise the return of those with no legal right to be in the country. The UK remains committed to continued engagement and co-operation with the EU on refugee and migration issues, and supports efforts to strengthen EU borders. While the approach led by the Commission may ensure consistency and strengthening of returns processes, it is unclear whether this recast will directly improve efficiency of returns. UK return procedures have continued to be a success in comparison to other EU member states, with strong relationships with third countries and new initiatives such as biometric returns. We remain focused on improving our returns procedures and do not rely on this directive to enact returns of third country nationals. Importantly, the Government are clear that border management is a sovereign issue.

Until the UK leaves the EU we remain a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s opt-in to EU legislation on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s commitment to protecting and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

[HCWS1290]

**PRIME MINISTER**

**Investigatory Powers Oversight**

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I have today laid before both Houses a copy of the annual report of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, Lord Justice Sir Adrian Fulford. The report covers the year 2017, including the establishment of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner’s Office (IPCO) under the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, and the work of Sir Adrian’s predecessors: the Intelligence Services Commissioner, the Interception of Communications Commissioner, and the Chief Surveillance Commissioner.

Overall, this report demonstrates that the security and intelligence agencies, law enforcement agencies and other relevant public authorities show high levels of operational compliance and respect for the law. The report also sets out the breadth and complexity of the powers covered by the 2016 Act and other legislation, and offers constructive criticism on the practical framework and individual instances of how these are used.

Further to section 234 of the 2016 Act, the Commissioner has also submitted to me a confidential annex to the report, dealing with the work of the security and intelligence agencies and the Ministry of Defence. I agree with the Commissioner’s assessment that publication of the information contained within this annex would be prejudicial to national security and not in the public interest.

I would like to thank the current and previous Commissioners, and their staff, for their important work. I am also grateful to the security and intelligence agencies, Government Departments, and civil society organisations which have helped to establish IPCO.

I commend this report to the House.

Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.
Petition

Monday 21 January 2019

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Access to Flash Glucose Monitoring in England

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 to 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.—[Presented by Keith Vaz, Official Report, 14 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 370.] [P002292]

The petition of residents of Crawley Constituency,

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 to 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.—[Presented by Henry Smith, Official Report, 14 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 371.] [P0022923]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine):

The NHS was founded on the principle of universal access—free at the point of delivery. This Government are committed to making sure that this principle remains.

The flash glucose monitoring system in question, FreeStyle Libre, was approved for reimbursement on National Health Service prescription from 1 November 2017 and is now available across the NHS. However, this is not a recommendation to automatically prescribe it as it is the responsibility of clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) to determine how funds are allocated for their local population based, on the relevant evidence and guidance. FreeStyle Libre is not suitable for everyone. Patients will need to discuss the ongoing management of their condition with their healthcare professional and consider whether FreeStyle Libre is suitable for them.

The Regional Medicines Optimisation Committee (RMOC) was asked to provide advice about Freestyle Libre to support local decision making and assist clinical commissioning groups in making effective use of this new technology. The RMOC brings together decision makers and clinicians to provide a credible source of consistent and reliable advice on medicines and devices for local NHS decision makers. Its advice sets out the criteria for patients who may be able to benefit from using the device, and suggested a careful start to its use because of a lack of data and recommended additional data collection to better understand the benefits for patients.

At the start of 2018, NHS England wrote to CCGs reminding them of their responsibilities and of the guidance that exists when it comes to flash glucose monitoring, and other treatments for people with Type 1 diabetes. NHS England continues to work with CCGs to strongly encourage them to adopt best practice. And in November 2018 NHS England issued a press release that announced action to end the current variation in diabetes care. NHS England continues to work with CCGs reminding them of their responsibilities and of the criteria for patients who may be able to benefit from using the device, and suggested a careful start to its use because of a lack of data and recommended additional data collection to better understand the benefits for patients.

At present, 178 out of 195 CCGs have now adopted Freestyle Libre for use. We are making progress—in November 2017 CCGs provided around 400 sensor packs to patients. By October 2018, this had risen to almost 20,000 packs. As of October 2018, CCGs have provided a total of almost 100,000 sensor packs at a total cost of £3.2 million.

Within its financial constraints, the NHS is committed to providing access to new medical technologies. We continue to support actions across the NHS to support the development and adoption of new technology, including new treatments for diabetes. Ultimately it is for CCGs, who are primarily responsible for commissioning diabetes services, to meet the requirements of their local population.

In doing so, they need to ensure that the services they provide are fit for purpose, reflect the needs of the local population, are based on the available evidence and take into account national guidelines.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 21 January 2019

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Protection for Homebuyers

The following is an extract from the speech by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler) in the Westminster Hall debate on protection for homebuyers on 13 December 2018.

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned the £10 ground rent. For a peppercorn to exist there must be a consideration, which can include an exchange of money. We are concerned that peppercorn could be open to abuse and therefore we have considered that an amount should be specified in statute. We have chosen £10 because that is the annual amount used for right to buys.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders).

The correct response should have been:

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned the £10 ground rent. For a peppercorn to exist there must be a consideration, which can include an exchange of money. We are concerned that peppercorn could be open to abuse and therefore we have considered that an amount should be specified in statute. We have chosen £10 because that is the annual amount used for right to buys.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Car Production: Solihull

The following is an extract from the Adjournment debate on Car Production: Solihull on 16 January 2019.

Richard Harrington: I am pleased to remind the House that, on 19 December, the Treasury published a review of the impact of the worldwide harmonised light vehicles test procedure on vehicle excise duty and company car tax. The review is open until 17 September.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington):

An error has been identified in the speech I gave on Car Production: Solihull.

The correct response should have been:

Richard Harrington: I am pleased to remind the House that, on 19 December, the Treasury published a review of the impact of the worldwide harmonised light vehicles test procedure on vehicle excise duty and company car tax. The review is open until 17 February.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Diabetes: Artificial Pancreas

The following is an extract from the Adjournment debate entitled Diabetes: Artificial Pancreas on 12 December 2018.

Caroline Dinenage: As the right hon. Gentleman said, artificial pancreas devices are an emerging technology that combines continuous glucose monitoring with insulin pumps. One system, the Medtronic 670G system, which he mentioned, was recently approved by the US Food and Drug Administration and a European licence is being pursued.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Care:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) in the debate entitled Diabetes: Artificial Pancreas.

The correct response should have been:

Caroline Dinenage: As the right hon. Gentleman said, artificial pancreas devices are an emerging technology that combines continuous glucose monitoring with insulin pumps. One system, the Medtronic 670G hybrid closed loop system, which he mentioned, was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration in 2016 and received a Conformité Européenne mark in June 2018."

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Syria

The following is an extract from Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions on 22 January 2019.

19. [908712] Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): A stable Lebanon is vital to securing a resolution to the conflict in Syria. I have just returned from Lebanon with Aid to the Church in Need, and we saw there that Lebanon is a country barely able to cope with the pressure it is under, having been without a Government for the past eight months. What has been done to ensure, while a Government are being found, that Lebanon remains stable and secure?

Alistair Burt: I met the Prime Minister of Lebanon, as did my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, on his visit to the United Kingdom. We work very closely with all parties in Lebanon to encourage the process of Government formation. We are acutely conscious of the pressure of 1.3 million refugees in Lebanon. We would encourage the return of refugees from Lebanon to Syria, but only when it is safe to do so. Support for Lebanon and its economy is a fundamental part of the United Kingdom’s engagement in the region.


Letter of correction from the Minister for the Middle East:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara).

The correct response should have been:

Alistair Burt: I met the Prime Minister of Lebanon, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary spoke to him on the telephone, on his visit to the United Kingdom. We work very closely with all parties in Lebanon to encourage the process of Government formation. We are acutely conscious of the pressure of 1.3 million refugees in Lebanon. We would encourage the return of refugees from Lebanon to Syria, but only when it is safe to do so. Support for Lebanon and its economy is a fundamental part of the United Kingdom’s engagement in the region.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 31 January 2019

TREASURY
Taxation of Low-income Families

The following is an extract from a debate on Taxation of Low-income Families in Westminster Hall on 16 January 2019.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Conservative party introduced the national living wage. We should be enormously proud of that fact.

It goes up by 4.9% in April, so those in full-time employment will take home £2,750 more than they did in 2010.

Letter of correction from Mel Stride:
An error has been identified in my response to this debate.

The correct wording should have been:

Mel Stride: The Conservative party introduced the national living wage. We should be enormously proud of that fact. It goes up by 4.9% in April, so those in full-time employment will take home £2,750 more than they did in 2016.